

a merry little christmas (let your heart be light) by intergaylactic

Category: IT (Movies - Muschietti), IT - Stephen King

Genre: Alternate Universe - Modern Setting, Christmas, Emotional Hurt/Comfort, Fluff, Fluff and Angst, M/M, Mutual Pining, also !! i might do a side thing for benverly bc i love them !! but idk yet, anyway enjoy my loves, bc i can, like in terms of appearances, myra doesn't play a major role btw, oh also !! :, she's more circumstantial than anything, this is a 'the holiday' au, this is a romcom au my dudes

Language: English

Characters: Ben Hanscom, Beverly Marsh, Bill Denbrough, Eddie Kaspbrak, Georgie Denbrough, Mike Hanlon, Myra Kaspbrak, Richie Tozier, Stanley Uris

Relationships: Bill Denbrough/Stamley Uris, Eddie Kaspbrak & Beverly Marsh, Eddie Kaspbrak/Richie Tozier, Richie Tozier & Stanley Uris

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Summary:

"Hi. I'm looking for someone to relieve me of being home this Christmas. The world is out to get me right now, and I intend to escape it. I live a train ride away from Boston, so there is civilization, but my house is in a quiet, very picturesque town."

"what's up my good dude, your house is cute and snowy and my good friend stan the man needs somewhere he can hide from his life. sound good?"

have you ever seen The Holiday (2006)?? this is that but reddie and stenbrough. welcome to the cozy christmas content that i want and have to make for myself !!!

1. it's beginning to look a lot like christmas

December in Massachusetts meant a lot of things: the shimmer of Christmas lights in storefronts, the soft glow of white snow in the darkness of an early twilight, carols in every building you entered. But Eddie Kaspbrak's main takeaway was that December in Massachusetts meant *cold*.

He burrowed his nose a little deeper into his scarf, sniffing, as he hurried down the sidewalk. The pretty snow could stay, he thought, but the cold was something he could do without.

It was seven thirty on a Tuesday morning, which meant it felt colder than usual, with the winds off of Boston Harbor sweeping wildly through the streets, knocking hats off of heads and chasing shivers down spines everywhere they went. Eddie shuddered as a gust hit him head-on, and thanked God that his office wasn't too far a walk from the train station.

He shoved his way through the double doors of the Boston Globe's headquarters, and let himself relax into the warmth of the lobby. He unwrapped his scarf as he flashed his ID badge at the front desk, heading for the elevators without preamble. He could get warm at his desk, where he was nice and comfy. Well, maybe not "comfy", given that his desk was tiny and caged by the high walls of a cubicle, shoved into the back corner of an office. And perhaps not "nice", either, as he was trapped between a trio of overworked PAs and interns, and the closed, polished door of Myra Wilson's office.

But it was warmer than outside, and it had a little hook for Eddie to hang his coat and bag, and a space for him to open his laptop and get to work. He even had enough room on the walls of his cubicle to keep sticky notes with ideas organized, and a calendar to be hung. He had a space, no matter how cramped and dismal, at one of the most prestigious newspapers in the country, and he had done it himself. There was something about it that Eddie still managed to be proud of, even if that pride was a little strained.

So he did what he did every morning: set up his things, reached into his bag for a clean mug that he had brought from home, and went to

get himself some coffee.

The break room was as chaotic as the office, with assistants darting about and writers and editors and everyone in between chatting and debating and sometimes straight up arguing about some piece someone had dared to submit. Eddie wove through them expertly, and poured himself a mug of dark roast with a splash of cream.

He maneuvered the drink back to his desk without spilling a drop, and settled in for the next nine hours of whatever the Boston Globe was going to throw at him.

That was, until he heard the small cough behind him.

Eddie whirled around to find Myra standing just outside the door to her office, wearing a glossy-pink smile that had never once met her eyes.

“Eddie, dear, a word?” Something in her voice told Eddie that there would, in fact, be many words.

Unable to refuse his supervisor, Eddie nodded and followed her into her office. Myra took a seat behind the broad oak desk that held the room’s place of honour, and spoke up before Eddie could take his usual seat. “Oh, hon, would you mind getting the door?”

Biting back a sigh, Eddie nodded and closed the door with a soft snick, though he longed for it to stay open; he wanted so badly to keep the two of them in view of the rest of the office, if only to keep Myra from doing something horrendous, as usual.

“Take a seat, dear, I have some thoughts on your proposal.” Myra laughed, then, and even her laughs sounded calculated and disquieting. “Oh - I mean, your article proposal! I don’t suppose you have any other kind you’d be interested in sending my way?” She said all of this as though it was a joke. Unfortunately for Myra, it wasn’t a very funny one.

Eddie took the offered seat in a chair - honestly, *his* chair - across from Myra, and tried to keep the scowl off of his face. “I submitted that *article* proposal -” as though he was going to acknowledge her

other idea? “- to Dan. I thought because it’s his department, it would be a better idea to go through him.” How had Myra even gotten her hands on a proposal from science and technology?

“Well, I was taking a gander through the submissions Vivian had collected -” Oh, that was how. “- and I spotted your name! *My* Eddie, submitting to Dan! So I thought I’d have a look, and honestly? You might thank me for pulling it out when I did, before Dan could read it. It’s - well, it’s a bit of a mess, dear.”

Oh, here we go.

“It’s all over the place, there’s simply no real *structure* to it, you know, and I’m worried that the idea itself doesn’t hold up under much scrutiny - a look into “pop science”, and the, sorry, ‘growing need for secondary studies’? I don’t know, Eddie, hon, it feels a little - *dry*, I suppose.”

Eddie, for his credit, was doing a fantastic job at not launching himself across the desk to maul Myra like a disgruntled jungle cat. But he was mostly able to stay still because of how close to his feet his stomach had sunk. He felt very wilted all of a sudden, like the energy he had marched into work with a mere half hour before had been sapped by the small, pitying smile on Myra’s face.

Like it or not, Myra was not incompetent. She was a veteran at the Globe, and had been editing the opinions and entertainment sections of the newspaper for nearly a decade. She was friends with all the right editors and publishers, and her name carried real weight in the journalism industry. Eddie was . . . what? Some twenty-eight year old kid straight out of an internship at the Boston Herald. So he had an undergrad in Journalism and International Relations, and a Master’s in Journalism? His degrees didn’t make him qualified to know if a piece was dogshit or not, experience in the field did. If Myra Wilson didn’t think his piece was good enough, then that was that.

“Well, then, um . . . thank you. For letting me know.”

Myra’s smile stretched. “Anytime, Eddie, dear. Now, while I’ve got you here, there’s a list of event columns and notices I need written up - quite a few weddings in here . . .”

It was dark by the time Eddie left the Globe, scarf securely guarding him from the wind as he rushed down the street. He hurried in part because he didn't want to miss his train, but mostly because he wanted to get as far from Myra as possible.

The train ride out to Belmont was a long one, and Eddie scrunched himself into his seat, one hand propping up his cheek, gaze fluttering along with the passing buildings outside the train window. As the concrete began to dissolve into neighbourhoods and patches of thick, snow-laden evergreen, Eddie felt more and more tired, as though his body could sense how much closer he was to the safety of home.

He walked home from the train station despite the biting chill, hoping to clear his crowded, anxious head before getting home. The doubt and discomfort planted in him by his meeting with Myra had festered throughout the day, fueled by his boredom as he plinked out notice after notice on his computer. He needed a distraction, desperately.

But by the time he was walking up to the door of his brownstone, his thoughts had not quieted in the least. He let himself inside, and the stale, cold air of his empty flat wasn't helping his mood. He toed off his shoes and untied his scarf, and slumped silently against the door that he had shut behind him.

He had a new proposal to start drafting.

Eddie disliked office parties, but was absolutely interested in free alcohol. This conundrum was what left him in his usual spot during this Christmas party: trying his hardest not to mingle with anyone, but camped out relatively close to the mulled wine. He was two glasses in, had spoken to one person in the past half hour, and was thus enjoying this Christmas party as best as he could.

He spotted Dan in the crowd nearby, and caught his eye. He had resubmitted that proposal last night, despite Myra's criticism on Tuesday; it felt right to him, from the pitch to the research. He felt good about that story, and he wanted to chase that. He moved forward, hoping to catch Dan for a moment to ask him about it -

Then he felt a hand on his shoulder, and the wine turned sour in his stomach.

Myra Wilson was smiling coyly at him, one hand on his shoulder, her manicured talons digging slightly in his sweater. He tried not to grimace when he smiled back at her before downing the rest of his wine.

Myra spun him around as she spoke, and he found himself face to face with an oddly familiar man. "Eddie, dear, I was wondering if you'd met my good friend, Mr. Gray. He works over at the Washington Post, in editing. Mr. Gray, this is Eddie Kaspbrak, one of my columnists."

Eddie looked up into the face of Bob Gray, a political editor at the Washington Post that he absolutely knew; he was on the list of Terribly Influential People Myra Wilson Knows that Eddie thought about on a regular basis.

"Merry Christmas, Eddie," Mr. Gray said, lifting his wineglass; there was a hard glint in his eye that Eddie wasn't sure if he liked. Eddie lifted his empty glass back at him.

"And this is Stevens, also from the Post, Mackenna from the Times . . . oh, and David, who worked with me at the Globe ages ago - he mostly manages the Sunday Times now . . ."

The anxiety in Eddie's gut was growing tremendously. This wasn't just Bob Gray; this was half of the biggest men in journalism, the ones who had the ability to make or break the careers of foolish little columnists like himself. Myra was smiling that terrible smile again, and Eddie was getting more nervous by the second.

"Eddie is really very good at the columns, though, aren't you dear? Oh, Eddie - sorry, gentlemen, one moment . . ." Myra, instead of walking them away for a moment, simply turned herself and Eddie to the side, standing adjacent to the group of chatting men.

"I noticed that you submitted another draft of that proposal to Dan." Myra frowned, dramatic and fake, and continued on as if Eddie's heart wasn't about to beat its way out of his chest. "I just want you to

know that I've taken care of it. He won't have to see it, your chance of writing for that department won't be ruined by something so . . . messy. I did tell you not to go through with it, Eddie dear, only because I didn't want you to embarrass yourself. It really was dreadful, hon."

Then, she turned them right back around to the small audience of clearly eavesdropping journalism bigwigs. Eddie somehow managed to keep from throwing up on anyone's shoes.

"Anyhow, Eddie is quite the talent at notices - he types them up so quickly! I could never, I'm so glad I have him for things like that . . ."

Eddie managed to escape Myra's clutches a half hour later, when he felt as though he'd like the winds outside to sweep him away into the void.

Ben drove Eddie home, with the promise that he could crash on Eddie's pullout couch. He had taken one look at Eddie's face as he stumbled out of Myra's clutches, and headed straight for the elevators with one hand on Eddie's arm to keep him steady.

They stopped once, for frozen pizzas and chardonnay.

When they got to Eddie's brownstone, they let themselves in to find Bill and Mike already on the couch. The opening shot of *She's the Man* was paused on his tv, and Mike's snickerdoodles were in a container on the coffee table. Eddie could have cried.

They took turns verbally eviscerating Myra, despite Eddie's protests that maybe she had a point, even if her methods were cruel. Ben just shook his head.

"I looked over that proposal, Eddie, it was solid. Dan would've been interested, I swear. Myra's just . . ."

"*She's the d - devil*," Bill piped up. He had an empty wineglass in hand, and he was gesturing with it dramatically. "*Muh - Myra is conspiring to keep you as her little notice boy for all eternity, b - because she knows you could crush her! In a, uh, journalistic w - way, I mean. You could journalis - t -tically crush her.*"

"She's got some serious issues, man," Mike agreed. "It's like she wants you to stay in that office forever."

Eddie could just see it: him, age 56, trapped behind ever-rotating young interns and PAs, taking notices from an immortal Myra. Eddie peeled himself off of the couch, standing as tall as he could. He needed this to feel momentous, to feel real. The anxiety storming in his stomach needed to lead to something productive, or it would wreck him. "I need to get the hell out of here."

Richie Tozier was very much into Christmas lights on palm trees. Especially when they came stitched on shirts, much to the dismay of everyone who cared about him.

"Where did you even *find* that?" Were the first words out of Stan's mouth when Richie walked into his office.

Richie grinned, the exact kind of grin that tended to make Stan start formulating a PR safety net in case of emergency. He twirled dramatically, letting the open button-up flutter around him, like someone twirling in a ballgown. "Do we like?"

"No, Richie, we *do not* like." Stan turned immediately back to his laptop, where he had a half-finished email that he needed to send out in eleven minutes. "It's an eyesore."

"I was going for extra horrendous, so thank you, Staniel!" Richie dropped into one of the chairs across from Stan, one leg draped over the arm, phone somehow already out of his pocket and in his hand.

A quiet few minutes of Stan steadily typing and Richie haphazardly scrolling was interrupted by the latter's tentative ". . . so."

"So?" Stan didn't even look up from his laptop; he had to just finish up the conclusion and salutation, and then he could tick off this task. Not to mention, the tone of Richie's "so" was suggestive enough that he wasn't sure he wanted to know where it was going.

"So, can I ask why your boxers were on your front lawn this

morning?”

“What?” Stan choked out, eyes darting to Richie’s, email forgotten for a split second. “What do you mean?”

“I *mean*, I swung around your place this morning - well, like, one, which is the afternoon or whatever - but I was there, and your boxers were on the grass. Just laying there, right next to those weird little gnomes.”

“What are you talking about?” Stan, wide-eyed and still processing this information, felt the beginnings of dread curdling in his stomach. He had a sick suspicion that he knew exactly what all of this was going to add up to, but didn’t want to jump to that conclusion just yet.

Richie leaned back in his chair, front legs lifting off the ground, as he watched Stan with a furrowed brow. “A pair of jeans were in the rose bush. A bunch of dress shirts scattered everywhere. It was like a closet massacre, dude - so what’s up? Remodeling? Are you branching out into new hobbies? Is it like an art piece or something that I don’t get? Because this is LA, Stanley, no one’s gonna care about something that, like, critiques consumerism or whatever the hell -”

“It’s not - it’s not an *art piece*, Richie, *God*.” Stan was picturing it: the mess, the grass stains, the dirt . . . “Everything was fine when I left this morning.”

“And when did you leave?”

“Around seven.”

Richie frowned. “And is everything alright with you and Cody?”

Stan frowned, too, but turned to type up the last few words of his email. He sent it without proofreading, which made Richie’s frown deepen.

“Yeah, we . . . well, I mean, I guess we had a bit of an argument last night, but everything was fine. He went to bed, and I just stayed up to work, and then I . . . well, I came here. Everything was fine.

Everything was normal.”

“Stan, my guy, you guys fought, and then you just . . . pretended like nothing happened? Again?” Richie was looking genuinely concerned now, and that was starting to make Stan more worried, so he looked back at his laptop screen.

He stared resolutely at his perfectly organized inbox as he said, “Well, yes. Because everything was fine.”

“Everything was fine?”

Stan nodded once, still not looking up. “Yes. Everything was fine.”

As it turned out, when Stan drove home that day and parked a few feet away from both his favourite hydrangea bush and his old UCLA sweatshirt, everything was definitely not fine.

He got out of his car slowly, taking care with his bag and the cardigan slung over his arm, and began the march up the driveway to the front door. A note had been taped to it, and he recognized Cody’s messy scrawl in thick, black marker: ‘I took my stuff, and left yours where it belongs. Don’t call me.’

When Stan stepped inside, he found Richie already on his couch, his feet propped up on the coffee table next to a mug of tea. He turned to watch Stan as he hung up his bag and made his way over to the couch, collapsing onto it. He felt oddly heavy, full of feeling that he wasn’t sure what to do with.

“God, you attract such drama queens, my dude.” Richie pulled him sideways, and Stan propped his head on his best friend’s shoulder, and he held all of that feeling awkwardly inside himself as he tried to get upset.

“At least this isn’t worse than Sam. I still can’t believe what he did to your record collection, it was practically against the Geneva Conventions . . .”

“I still haven’t replaced them all,” Stan agreed.

“Especially the Fleetwood Mac ones! You’d had those since high

school, and he just goes and does *that* to them? *Monstrous*. At least you can always just get new boxers.”

Stan sat up, letting out a rasping, odd laugh. “Yeah. God, this is pointless.”

“Yeah? You wanna start the comfort food, skip the tea? I think there’s still rocky road from last time -”

“No,” Stan said, frowning. “I mean I want to be productive with this. I don’t care if some Nsync reject doesn’t want to date me anymore - we weren’t actually even living together, so what’s the point of getting upset over it?”

“Uh,” was all Richie said as Stan rambled, standing up from the couch.

“I mean, he’s gone, and now I just have to get new boxers. Life goes on. I had a life before I met Cody, and I still have a life now.”

“Yeah? Is this - is this how we’re taking this?” Richie stood along with Stan, clearly baffled by his friend’s growing energy.

“Yes, of course it is,” Stan said, as if this were obvious. Which, of course, it was. All of it was true, and all of it was more helpful than moping about for someone like Cody.

“Of course,” Richie echoed, nodding slowly. “Of course. Who wants to get upset over stupid old Cody? Or Sam, or Lawrence, or Josh, or Calum -”

Stan held up a hand, eyes narrowed in annoyance. “Your point?”

“You don’t think mourning any of these guys would be, I don’t know, healthy, or something? Like getting weepy about just one relationship?”

“No?”

“... alrighty then. Onto the Moving On Train we go!”

But as Richie bounced his way into Stan’s kitchen, now talking about

making ice cream sundaes, Stan stood alone in his living room, thinking. Cody hadn't been different from Sam, or Lawrence, or Josh, or Calum - they had all flit into and out of Stan's life with equal irrelevance. They hurtled into his routine, trying to keep pace alongside him, flashing him blinding smiles and the exact kind of good looks that felt necessary in an industry like this one, and then vanished the moment Stan wasn't enough. He didn't talk enough, or smile enough, or go out enough. There was always something they thought he could do more of, and they all thought of themselves as the cure to whatever flaw they had discovered.

Cody thought he wasn't sensitive enough. He said Stan didn't feel enough in their relationship, or in general.

Stan just stood in his living room, those words clanging around in his brain while his heart remained quiet in his chest, uninterested. It was used to failing these expectations. Cody leaving had been an inevitability. Why be upset?

Right?

Richie poked his head out of the kitchen, somehow with a smudge of chocolate on his cheek already. "You comin'?"

Stan glanced over at him, frowning, and said, "I think I need to get the hell out of LA."

It was fueled by tipsiness and scrounged up snacks on both sides, though the dialogue from *She's the Man* was the soundtrack playing in Eddie's living room, while on the other end of the country Richie was blasting Queen in Stan's immaculate kitchen.

"Switching houses?" Richie asked, and Stan perked up from the couch. They had been scrolling through LA escape ideas for the past half hour, with nothing appealing to show for it.

"What?"

Richie scooped up his laptop and carried his findings over to Stan.

"It's this website where you and a stranger switch houses. It's like a mutual AirBNB."

Stan frowned at the screen, scrolling through the website carefully. He glanced up at Richie, who had been waiting with bated breath. "Where would I go?"

"Here." Richie said it firmly, easily, opening up a link and jabbing a finger onto the screen maybe too aggressively. He'd already picked out a house, which Stan couldn't help but smile at. So he followed Richie's pointing and scanned the post.

Hi. I'm looking for someone to relieve me of being home this Christmas. The world is out to get me right now, and I intend to escape it. I live a train ride away from Boston, so there is civilization, but my house is in a quiet, very picturesque town. The caption accompanied a photo of a little brownstone house, evergreen in the small yard and a wreath on the front door. The world there was light with snow, and the glowing windows of the house looked warm.

Stan nodded, at first just to himself, as he studied the photo. ". . . Yeah, okay."

"Yes!" Richie crowed, plopping himself down next to Stan, laptop balanced on his knees. "So, all we gotta do is message this guy and hash out the details."

"Alright. Just don't be . . ." Stan trailed off as he read over Richie's shoulder, and sighed. ". . . weird."

Eddie jumped at the notification, and glanced around to make sure no one could see his screen. The interns seeming far too harried to bother snooping on him, Eddie opened his email.

It was a notification from HouseSwap.com.

He opened it hurriedly, as though this were a deadly secret and not vacation plans, and read the message. Then he frowned, deeply.

what's up my good dude, your house is cute and snowy and my good friend stan the man needs somewhere he can hide from his life. sound good?

Looking up, Eddie reread his own listing caption and winced; there had been too much chardonnay involved in that message, not to mention Bill and Mike and Ben egging him on. In retrospect, he could've gotten stranger responses.

So he messaged back.

“He’s replied already! Man, this guy needs to get out of town. You don’t think he’s on the run, do you?”

“And going on HouseSwap.com? No. What did he say?” Stan peered impatiently over Richie’s shoulder.

Um yeah, that sounds good. How soon can you come here?

Richie looked to Stan, then back to the laptop and typed away without waiting for an answer to be given to him.

right away - like, tomorrow even. still cool?

Eddie’s face lit up, and he felt a bit of the tension of being so close to Myra ease in his chest. Tomorrow? Not doable, but he could definitely work with that starting point.

How about Monday? I can get maybe a week and a half off of

work by then. Where do you live?

“Oh shit right, we should probably tell him that.” Richie paused.
“Could we just send him the google maps link?”

“No, just - tell him like a normal person. He wants to know what the house is like, no surveillance photos.”

“Fine, fine, be boring then. Regular old description comin’ right up!”

oh it’s in LA, like almost hollywood??? it’s really fancy and he has a sweet kitchen and bathroom, and some very nice rose bushes. it’s lowkey like living in a fancy hotel.

LA? Eddie hadn’t been expecting it to be so far. But, getting a whole country away from Myra . . .

He typed back almost embarrassingly quickly.

That sounds amazing. Is Monday good for you (or your friend I guess)??

“Well, Staniel?” Richie turned to him, eyebrows raised and fingers poised over the keyboard, ready to strike. “Is Monday good for you?”

Stan’s gaze shifted from Richie to the photo on the laptop, to the warm windows. He thought about Cody for a second, as he’d been doing occasionally since coming home to that note. He shied away from the thought, and bit his lip.

“Yeah. Monday’s good.”

“Well then pack your bags my guy, because you are going to Boston!

Or, well, a town that's Boston-adjacent!"

**monday's good for sure !!!! stan the man will touch down soon
!!!**

Eddie beamed. He caught the eye of one of the interns, who was sorting photocopies and looking as though she had just paid tens of thousands of dollars in tuition to do so. Eddie just smiled brighter, and kept on smiling all the way back to his place. He opened a suitcase that night, and felt lighter than he had in ages.

He was going to LA.

If LA was anything, it was *hot*.

Eddie felt the heat hit him like a slow, rolling wave the moment he left the airport. His sweater was tied around his waist, but even his shirt felt too heavy for the warmth that seemed to cocoon him. He trudged through it anyway, reveling in the strangeness of such warmth mere hours after the snowy wind in Boston.

He managed to find a cab and got to the address perfectly fine - or, he thought it was the address. It definitely matched the one Stan Uris - who has insisted they share personal information - had emailed him.

But this house was enormous. It had its own *gate*. Eddie climbed uncertainly out of the cab, glancing back and forth between the address he had on his phone and the matching numbers on the gate looming before him.

He accepted his bags from the cab driver, who vanished and left him to deal with this ridiculous house on his own. Eddie gathered his nerves and marched resolutely up to the gate, typing in the password Stan had also sent him. Eddie had assumed it was for the garage. He had clearly not been correct.

The gate swung open, and he slowly made his way up the driveway to the front door. He passed by the acclaimed rosebushes, which really were lovely. He opened the door with the key left in the mailbox, and then he was inside Stan's ridiculous, enormous house. His footsteps echoed, for fuck's sake.

He abandoned his bags in the living room, and made his way up the stairs, peeking into rooms. There was something about being in someone else's home without them that felt odd and furtive, as though he might be caught by someone. But no one jumped out at Eddie as he walked into the master bedroom, and laid eyes on the biggest, comfiest bed he had ever seen.

The odd amount of jet lag felt like a sudden burden on his open eyes, and Eddie experimentally drew the curtains. The room grew dim instantly, invitingly so, and Eddie wanted to thank the mysterious deity of Stan Uris and his blackout curtains.

Eddie fell into the bed, thousands of miles away from Myra, and it was just as comfy as it looked.

Stan was cold, and he wasn't sure if he liked it or not. On the one hand, it was cold; on the other, he had wanted a change. Cold was change.

He still kept a tight grip on his scarf, which had nearly escaped him earlier outside of the airport. The weather in Boston seemed determined to be as different from LA as possible, but Stan was starting to think it was a good thing. Different was change.

And so, with a hand on his scarf and another on his suitcase handle, Stan walked up the front steps of Eddie Kaspbrak's brownstone. The windows weren't warm yet, but Stan figured that wouldn't be hard to fix.

It was noticeably quiet when he stepped inside the house. The

neighborhood had been as quiet as Eddie had promised in his ad, but he hadn't realized just how quiet it would be inside the house. No traffic, no people, no phone calls or meetings or sounds of any kind. Just Stan's own breathing. He shook off this initial strangeness and carried his suitcase into the bedroom, which was up a small rickety staircase. The house felt old in the way a lot of New England seemed to, and Stan moved a little like he would in a museum.

He left his suitcase tucked neatly under Eddie's twin bed after changing into pyjamas, and changing the sheets with his own. Heading back downstairs, Stan fiddled with the old fashioned heater to get it started and pattered about in the kitchen, finding a can of cider in the fridge, along with some produce and a note taped to it that read 'take whatever you need, or it'll go bad - eddie.'

Curling up on the couch with an old favourite novel and his cider in a clean glass, Stan had to admit to himself that Richie had done the impossible and found a way for him to genuinely relax, if only for a moment.

And not a perfectly attractive guy in sight for Stan to inevitably let down.

Eddie was dragged from sleep by a bang from downstairs, and a very loud voice calling, "Hey, HouseSwap.com guy! You here?!"

He sat up blindly in the pitch black room, for a moment forgetting where he was. When his heart calmed a bit, Eddie stumbled his way out of bed and to the hallway, wandering down to the living room. There was a great racket happening in the kitchen.

Eddie was still rubbing sleep out of his eyes when someone said, "What's up, I just - oh."

He looked over at a very tall, wild-haired guy watching him through huge glasses like he was the most fascinating thing he had ever seen.

Eddie blinked slowly, half asleep, and said, "Oh. Hi. I'm Eddie."

And that was how he met Richie Tozier wearing only an oversized college t shirt, unaware of both his lack of pants and the way Richie's breath caught in his throat when Eddie first spoke.

"And I'm hopefully your primary love interest," Richie said, smiling as though relishing in the slow spread of Eddie's blush. He sank into a deep, melodramatic bow, and Eddie decided right there and then that he was ridiculous. "At your service, monsieur."

Stan was barely a third of the way through his book when he fell asleep on the couch, head leaning back against the cushions, snoring softly. He startled awake when there was a knock on the door.

"Eddie!" The voice on the other side of the door was definitely a guy, and definitely knew Eddie. Stan, shaking away the last remnants of sleep, watched the door like it was a possibly dangerous animal. He was waiting for it to make the first move.

"Eddie! D - dude!" Mystery Guy knocked again, harder. Stan could hear the howling of the wind, and played with the fabric of his warm blanket, contemplating. It had to be freezing out there. What if this guy was locked out? What if Stan left him out there, and he died of hypothermia or frostbite or some other cold-weather terror?

God, people in New England face death for a whole season, Stan thought as he crossed over to the front door. *How do they even justify this much cold to themselves, when they could live anywhere a bit more temperate -*

Stan swung open the door and froze, though not from the cold. He was rooted to the spot by a pair of bright blue eyes looking expectantly at him. The casual tilt of a head, the grin of a friend you've known forever who you could share anything with.

Standing on Stan's - well, Eddie's - front doorstep was one of the cutest guys Stan had met in literal years. He was all earth tones:

mussed auburn hair, warm red flannel, brown boots, brown freckles. His nose was pink from the cold, and he was noticeably shivering.

“H - hey.” His grin was starting to change; it didn’t disappear, but some of that all-knowing intimacy slipped from it, leaving a regular friendly smile. It was a bit lopsided, and it was still stealing the breath from Stan’s lungs.

“Hi.” Stan cleared his throat, trying desperately not to completely embarrass himself. He didn’t think he was doing a very good job of that.

“Sh - shit, you’re Stan, right? Sorry, I totally forgot Eddie was d - doing this today - he kind of kept it t - to himself.” He held out one confident hand, and Stan took it numbly. “I’m Bill Denbrough, I’m Eddie’s neighbour-slash-best-friend.”

“Oh. I’m Stan.”

“C - cool. Hey, w - would it be okay if w - we take this inside? It’s fucking *freezing*.”

Stan nodded, stepped aside for Bill to enter. He was tall, but was still an inch or two shorter than Stan. He went right to the couch, and dropped his backpack on the coffee table. When he sat down, it looked like he completed the room somehow.

“So, I w - was gonna show Eddie this new game I got, c - call Mike and Ben over . . . d - did you w - wanna join instead?”

Stan stood there for a long moment, then nodded. He didn’t know who Mike and Ben were, but he wanted for Bill Denbrough to stay right there in his temporary living room, no matter what he was doing.

He was so fucked.

2. this evening has been (so very nice)

Eddie liked LA enough to venture out of Stan's ridiculous house beyond things like getting food. He roamed the streets like a real tourist, took photos. He liked to get up in the morning and just start walking; the more anxious his dreams, the more he walked. And, despite the distance, Eddie was still plagued by anxious dreams: Myra Wilson had followed him to California.

He tried to ignore this as best he could, but the image of Bob Gray and all those other journalism powerhouses staring down at him, the meek, stupid little upstart, was apparently imprinted on his brain. So his first three days in LA were something odd: briskly walking down warm, sunny sidewalks, and eating burritos to escape his nightmares. But what was definitely more odd was the lingering presence of Richie Tozier.

One of Stan's clients, and also a close friend, as he himself had explained on Eddie's first day. Richie had tried to usher Eddie first to take a seat on the couch, and then into the dining room where there were actual chairs. Eddie evaded both of these attempts with all the grace of a newborn giraffe, and instead stayed hovering uncomfortably in the living room while Richie sat on Stan's fancy couch.

He was loud, and obnoxious. He left his feet on the coffee table even though Eddie was certain Stan wouldn't like that. He towered over Eddie, enough that he almost had to tilt his head to look at him, which Eddie didn't enjoy at all. He spilt orange juice on the floor almost miraculously, and made at least three jokes about trying to fuck Eddie's mother.

He wasn't sure if he wanted Richie to come back.

But the universe cared very little about what he wanted, he discovered, when he came back home from his walk at almost eight pm to find Richie sprawled over Stan's couch, watching a movie.

"Hey there, angel," Richie called the moment Eddie walked in the door; he thought for a second about turning right back around and

leaving, but steeled his will enough to go inside.

“Hi.” Eddie strode past Richie and to the stairs, but paused to ask over his shoulder, “Does Stan just let you come in here whenever you like?”

Richie snorted. “I mean, he’d have a hard time keeping me out - but yeah, basically. There are rules, but I may as well show up whenever.”

“Don’t you live somewhere, or . . .?”

“Yes, Eddie Spaghetti, I do have a home. I just like hanging out with Stanley. In Stanley’s home, on Stanley’s very nice couch.”

“. . . Okay.” Eddie continued up the stairs, and slipped into the adjoining bathroom to Stan’s bedroom. He intended to scrub every bit of LA grime off of himself, maybe make some of the frozen pizza he’d picked up yesterday or hit up the local burrito place again, and hopefully wait out Richie’s departure in the bedroom.

He marveled at the feeling of a new, pristine shower (as much “character” as old New England houses had, Eddie couldn’t fully appreciate the failings of equally old bathroom fixtures), and took his time lathering up some of the apricot body wash he’d brought with him.

Eddie stepped out of the shower feeling significantly lighter - there was always something about taking a good, long shower that managed to clear his head in a way that these long walks sometimes couldn’t. He wrapped himself in one of Stan’s fluffy towels, and stepped out of the bathroom and into the bedroom.

Richie was lounging on the bed, legs sticking straight up and balanced against the wall above the headboard. He turned to look as Eddie entered the room, and grinned. “Stan’s got some nice towels, huh? I think about stealing one maybe once a week.”

“Jesus Christ!” Eddie jumped about a foot in the air, heart racing. Richie just laughed, flopping onto his side to see Eddie more clearly.

“Nope, just me,” he said, popping the ‘p’. “Though, funny enough,

you aren't the first person to yell that while in a bedroom with me." The suggestive waggle of his eyebrows made Eddie flush, and also infuriated him.

"What are you doing in here? Don't you knock?" He hissed the words as though someone might be nearby listening in, and he didn't want to get caught. As though anything about this was compromising, and not just Richie being an idiot.

"Sometimes," Richie said, rolling off Stan's bed and onto his feet. Eddie backed away before he could think better of it.

"I was just wondering if maybe you wanted to do something less depressing than the burrito place around the corner."

"I - I don't know what you're talking about." Eddie scowled, clutching the towel tighter around himself as though it could shield him mentally, too.

"I have a friend who hangs out there, like, all the time. She's seen you there three times in the past forty eight hours. She actually lives next door -" They both paused as the telltale sound of the front door opening and closing came from downstairs. "- and that's her now."

"Anybody home?" The voice that carried up the stairs was female, and friendly, and fast approaching. "Richie?"

"In the bedroom!" Richie called.

"Not - well, not like -" Eddie stammered, scrambling for a way to be defensive while not sounding at all defensive. It wasn't working.

"Hey." A thin, strong hand knocked on the bedroom door, and a thin, strong woman stepped inside almost immediately afterward. A halo of messy, cropped red hair framed her freckled face, and she held herself gracefully even with her hands shoved into the pockets of her faded cargo jacket. Something about her was familiar in a way Eddie couldn't seem to place. "Don't worry, I almost never assume Richie is getting some."

"Rude!" Richie squawked, dropping back onto the bed. He seemed to sprawl over every piece of furniture he touched.

"But fair," the woman said, grinning devilishly. She turned to Eddie, and her smile softened considerably. "Is this guy bothering you?"

Richie shot out another "rude!" at the same time that Eddie blurted out "Yes."

The woman laughed, a sharp and entrancing sound, and held out a hand. She wore a small collection of glimmering rings on her slim fingers, and her black nail polish was chipping.

"I'm Bev," she said, and then it clicked.

"Are you - are you Beverly Marsh?" Eddie had a hard time forcing the curiosity out of his voice.

Bev snorted a laugh, and Richie echoed her. She shrugged, and her bright eyes seemed to harden. "And if I am?"

"No, I just - you just looked familiar, is all. Just wondering."

Bev's steely gaze gave way to that easy half smile as she seemed to size Eddie up, blushing and fidgeting in just his towel. "Rad."

"So, we were wondering -" Richie began to cut in, but Eddie interrupted him before he could fully stand from the bed.

"No. No to whatever this is. Not until I get dressed."

"Alright, Eds," Richie said, leaning back on his hands and giving Eddie a dramatic once-over. "Go right ahead."

"Get our while I'm changing, you idiot!" Eddie snapped, pointing furiously to the bedroom door. "Go!"

"You sure? What if you need help with -"

"Let him change, Richie, and stop harassing Stan's new friend," Bev chided with a roll of her eyes. She grabbed Richie by the sleeve and tugged him teasingly out of the bedroom, while he made a spectacle of trying to stay put.

The door closed behind them and Eddie padded over to his suitcase,

pulling out a clean t shirt and shorts. He slowly dropped his towel, looking apprehensively to the door; it didn't move an inch. How was someone like Stan, whose emails read like professional instruction manuals, friends with someone like Richie? Eddie couldn't quite make sense of it.

When he opened the door, Bev and Richie were no longer in the hallway. He made his way down to the living room, where they were spread out on Stan's couch, Bev's feet in Richie's lap, Richie reading a dumb tweet aloud to her. When Eddie entered they both looked up at him, and Richie let out a huge, fake gasp.

"Why, Edward Kaspbrak, I do believe those are the *shortest* shorts I've seen in this here city of L A Angeles!" Richie cried in a high-pitched accent, clearly aiming for Gone With the Wind but landing closer to Beverly Hillbillies.

"That," Eddie said with a frown, "Was awful."

"Oh he knows." Bev grinned at him. "I think he does bad ones on purpose, so that when he does a good one it's a big surprise. Keeps everyone's expectations nice and low."

"Oh? There are *good ones* , hmm?"

"Try good *one* . Joe Peschi."

Richie opened his mouth to speak, but Eddie cut him off hastily. "I really don't want to know."

"Your loss, sugar," Richie said, then catapulted himself off the couch so suddenly that Bev yelped, her feet flying from his lap.

"Asshole," she muttered, curling her legs to her chest as she glared at Richie.

Richie wasn't looking at Bev, though; he was looking at Eddie. And Eddie did not like the glint he could see in Richie's eye.

"So, we were wondering if maybe you wanted to do something less depressing than Nella's for the third night in a row."

“Like?”

“You know, I’m not seeing much of a difference between this and my plans.”

“That’s because you’re from Massachusetts, Eds. The only Mexican food you have out there is Chipotle.”

“No! We have other ones, local ones -“

“Like, seven in the whole state or whatever. Am I right in assuming Nella’s is your first Mexican place that wasn’t a burrito bowl chain?”

“. . . shut up.”

Eddie glared at Richie over the basket of tortilla chips that were left on their table. He, Richie and Bev had nestled themselves into a corner table in a Mexican restaurant way further into Downtown LA than Eddie had ever ventured. The place was warm and bright, Christmas lights strung up from every rafter, and the music blasting from some speakers in the corner was about half Christmas and half ‘club bangers’, as Richie called them. It was nice, even if Eddie had to experience it across a table from Richie Tozier.

“What I’m getting at is that, because of your tragic Bostonian upbringing -“

“I’m from Maine, you dick!”

“Oh, angel, that’s even worse.”

“Richie, you moved here from *New Hampshire*,” Bev said with a smirk. “Who the hell are you talking about tragically New English upbringings to?”

“Oh, fuck off,” Richie laughed. “I’ve had my LA-ducation, thank you very much, so now I have a duty to pass on the wise words someone

once said to my dumb younger self.” He turned to Eddie, looking him straight in the eye, his face a mask of intensity. He tried to take one of Eddie’s hands over the tabletop, but Eddie yanked it back, confused. “Eds, you have no taste. I’m so sorry.”

“Fuck you!” Eddie snapped. “And stop calling me that, would you?”

“No, probably not,” Richie said and grinned as he spotted their waitress returning to them. “Oh, you’re about to experience so much of what makes life worth living.”

“Yeah?” Eddie asked, skeptical, as the waitress set three margaritas and three shots of tequila on the table.

“Shots first?” Bev asked, glancing between Eddie and Richie.

“Shots first!” Richie declared.

The shot burned, but Eddie had been a college student once; he was familiar with this part. But following it with the margarita felt dangerous: it was sweet-sour and not at all burning, and Eddie nearly gulped it down before remembering why that might be a bad idea.

Richie clearly had no concerns with that, however, because he downed his easily and ordered a second.

“The first is for consumption, satisfaction, you know? The second is for sipping,” he explained when it arrived, and he took a dainty sip, pinkie stuck out mockingly.

“Right,” Eddie replied, and sipped his own (first) drink. He glanced at Bev, who was proving to be a pretty conservative drinker. “So . . . how do you guys know Stan?”

“Neighbour,” Bev said, then laughed lightly. “But you knew that. He also, uh, he’s been helping me out a lot the last couple of years with some stuff, like business stuff. He’s an agent, like for entertainment, and manages PR for people, too.”

“And he’s helping you with business stuff?” Eddie didn’t want to pry - well, maybe he did, actually. It wasn’t everyday that you go to dinner with a disgraced and forgotten child star.

“Yeah. There’s some stuff that I’ve been meaning to work on, and he’s helped a lot in getting that off the ground. He’s -“ Bev paused, thoughtful. “- he’s a really good person.”

There was a moment of odd silence that followed this declaration, which was broken by Richie’s need to talk any chance he got.

“He’s my agent, like, full-time,” he said, leaning casually back against the wall behind his chair. He was smiling self assuredly, and he had caught Eddie’s gaze in his own sparkling one. “I work in comedy.”

For the first time since he had met Richie, Eddie laughed. It was loud and rib-cracking, and he couldn’t help himself.

When he looked back up at him, Richie was giving him a lopsided smile that sent a rush of something to Eddie’s stomach. If he felt flushed, however, he could put it down to the tequila.

“See? I’m so good I don’t even have to tell a joke!”

At some point their food appeared, and Eddie wasn’t sure if it was the margarita talking or him, but these had to be the best quesadillas he’d ever had.

“God, these are the best quesadillas I’ve ever had.”

“What did I tell you, Spaghetti?”

“Don’t call me that.”

“And miss a chance to see you blush? No way. Oh, here, try a tamale.”

“You’re the worst,” Eddie said, glaring, as he accepted the offered tamale from Richie’s plate.

Richie winked. “Only because I’ve concentrated all my energy into being the best at what really matters.”

“Jokes?”

“I was gonna say oral, but that’s another great addition!”

Eddie choked slightly on his tamale - though he did manage to notice how delicious it was through the panic of choking - and Bev gave him a reassuring pat on the back. "Don't worry, he doesn't mean it." She shot Richie a spiteful glance out of the corner of her eye, and continued to Eddie in a fake-whisper, "He's terrible at sex, so he overcompensates."

"And Bev is just jealous that Stan likes me more, so she makes fun of me," Richie shot back. There wasn't a drop of venom in his voice or Bev's. Everything about them seemed easy and familiar, like they melded just right: Bev stole some of Richie's chips, Richie laughed and called her carrot-top in the voice of a plucky 50s movie star (well, Eddie assumed that was what he was going for - it was hard to tell most of the time).

And it was strange that they managed to pull Eddie into the conversation as easily as Bill or Mike or Ben would have. Bev, who stayed the most sober, gifted him her remaining quesadilla and physically put one of her rings on his pinkie, insisting the stone matched the colour of his eyes perfectly. Richie tossed dumb jokes and pick up lines at Eddie like he was pitching fastballs, as though trying to catch him off guard; but every time he managed to he just smiled like he'd accomplished something Nobel-prize-worthy, and carried on with whatever nonsensical bit he was spinning next. Richie kept touching his scuffed converse to Eddie's feet, like the world's worst game of footsie. Eddie would curtly jab him back, and Richie would grin at him from across the table. It seemed as though getting a rise out of Eddie was an absolute delight to him.

By the time the three of them stumbled out of the restaurant it was nearly midnight, and Bev was doubled over laughing at Richie, who had tripped and landed backwards into a potted plant. His glasses askew, face flushed with laughter, gaudy yellow Hawaiian shirt billowing around him, Richie looked beautiful to Eddie. It lasted a split second, but the impression was striking, and left him a bit dazed.

"See something you like, Eds?" Richie was smiling right at him, and Eddie felt another sudden rush down to his stomach. It fluttered, tiny butterfly wings kissing his insides, and he wondered at how gross metaphors for affection were.

“Definitely not,” Eddie said, rolling his eyes and reaching down to help Richie up. “Not even remotely.”

Notes for the Chapter:

what's up my good yees and haws !! i'm back less than 24 hours later bc i've been binge-writing this fic and want validation as fast as possible like the gremlin i am lmao - also i'll be writing chapters back and forth between eddie & richie and stan & bill, so stenbrough is en route <3 i love everybody who has read this so far <3 <3 <3 i'm tentatively aiming for this fic to have 14 chapters, so hopefully i have this baby finished by christmas (that's the goal anyway). i'll inevitably be back real soon bc i have so much to say in this au and lots of cute shit to share with the world <3 <3

3. making spirits bright

Letting Bill into Eddie's house had been the most insensible sensible thing Stan had ever done. On the one hand, of course he wasn't going to let this stranger freeze to death on his (temporary) porch. On the other hand, this stranger looked at Stan for two seconds and melted his insides with a smile, which seemed very dangerous.

"Ben and muh- Mike are on their w- way," Bill said, smiling as he hung up his phone. He smiled openly, which made Stan both weak-kneed and a bit jealous. *It's like you don't feel anything* echoed in Stan's head, and not for the first time since the Cody Breakup Of December 13th, he wondered if he would ever be the kind of person who could hand out fondness this casually.

"Oh, and Mike's b- bringing brownies." From the way Bill said this, it sounded like very good news.

"Great." Stan forced a smile out of himself, but it felt uncomfortable next to the easy sweetness of Bill, perched on Eddie's couch and now scrolling through twitter.

"Have you eaten yet?" Bill asked, glancing up at him. A tiny crinkle appeared between his eyebrows, as though Stan's hunger had become a personal concern of his within the past three minutes of knowing him.

God, he was so *fucked* .

"Oh, uh, no. I didn't get in until about -" he glanced at his watch, if only to have a moment of reprieve from Bill's face, "- two hours ago. So, no. I haven't."

"Oh, s- sick. I could order pizza? You're not allergic tuh- to anything, are you?"

Stan felt himself nodding, before he realized that there were two different questions. "No, I'm not allergic to anything. Just - no pepperoni."

“Vegetarian?” Bill asked as he opened up an app, searching for nearby pizza places.

“No, uh - kosher.” Bill glanced up, and Stan shrugged. “You know, Jewish.”

“Oh, wicked.” And that was that, Bill going back to his phone to order dinner.

Stan felt a bit dizzy. A startlingly attractive guy with absurdly blue eyes had waltzed his way into Eddie’s house and Stan’s evening, and was now throwing together an impromptu welcome party and buying him dinner. His novel lay forgotten on the coffee table, his half-finished cider growing stale. This was a night suddenly out of his hands, and he needed to go practice Bev’s deep breathing exercises before his lungs stopped functioning altogether.

Without another word, Stan hurried from the little living room and up the stairs, shutting the door to the bathroom behind him with a reassuring snap. Alone with the calming smell of Eddie’s lavender handsoap, he could think this through.

Well, maybe less think and more relax. He let himself sink to the floor, back pressed against the door, and took slow, deep breaths, exactly as Bev had taught him: in on seven, out on eleven. He didn’t know Ben and Mike, but Eddie seemed normal enough, so they couldn’t be murderers or anything if they were friends with him. And Bill . . . he definitely wouldn’t be friends with awful people. Stan wasn’t sure why he was so convinced of it, but he didn’t think Bill would be steering him too horribly wrong.

Though he had been wrong about cute guys before. Multiple times, if Richie’s extensive list was anything to go by.

After a few minutes, just when it was starting to get weird for him to still be in the bathroom, Stan slipped back out into the hallway. There were new voices downstairs, and he took another deep breath. This would be fine. He was best friends with Richie, for fuck’s sake, he could handle Eddie’s friends.

Mike and Ben, presumably, were hanging out in the living room

when Stan came back downstairs. Bill looked up from his phone when he walked in, and Stan ignored the slight catch in his own breath when he met Bill's eyes. God, he was such a sucker for pretty eyes, and Eddie's neighbour-slash-best-friend had to have some of the prettiest eyes he'd ever seen. *Typical* .

"Huh- hey! Guys, this is Stan, he's s- super cool and doesn't eat pigs. S- Stan, this is Ben and Mike."

Stan flushed at Bill's words - *super cool* rang in his ears, and would likely do so for the rest of the night - and swung his attention to the other two to avoid looking at him.

"Ben," said the soft-cheeked guy, still in his jacket. He did a sort of high-five handshake when Stan reached out to shake hands, as though the formality felt strange to him. From the way Ben leaned forward at first as though to hug him, Stan reasoned with himself that there were worse people in the world than those who were too free with hugs.

"I'm Mike," said the guy who had stood up off the couch to greet him. His hand was dry and warm when Stan shook it, and his voice and smile were kind. "I live across the street, if you need anything while you're here."

"As if I'm not r- right next door, Michael," Bill said before Stan could reply. "I'm also a vuh- valuable resource for help and company!"

"Mostly just company," Mike said to Stan, still smiling. "He's not too helpful."

"No, but I'll definitely t- try," Bill countered. Stan glanced over at him, and was struck once again by how casually cute he was. He had the blanket wrapped snugly around his shoulders now, and beneath his open flannel Stan could see a band shirt whose logo looked vaguely familiar. Everything about Bill seemed perfectly homey.

"You did fix my cable box once," Ben admitted, hanging up his jacket on the coat tree by the door. Stan silently appreciated the neatness with which they had handled their things, so that he wouldn't be slowly driven out of his mind by discarded hats for the night.

“Exactly,” Bill said, snapping a finger gun at Ben.

“But you did it by accidentally dropping it on the floor. I still have no idea how that worked.”

“That’s the s- secret Ben: no one knows how cable boxes w- work. And also it doesn’t matter anymore, because we all just have Netflix.”

“Fair.” Ben looked over to Stan, who found himself still just hovering nearby the couch and cushy armchair. “Stan, why don’t you take the place of honour tonight?” He gestured to the armchair, and Stan had to admit it looked damn comfortable.

“Yeah, take the spot of pride,” Bill agreed.

Stan walked over and curled himself up in the chair, which was just as comfy as it looked. It was right next to the side of the couch that Bill was snuggled into, and he offered Stan a small, reassuring smile when he sat down. He also whipped out his phone, showing Stan the current state of their pizza ordering process.

“So, w- we’re down to either veggie or Hawaiian pizza. Please decide for us, or we w- will honestly be here all night.”

“Um - veggie?” Stan hated how much it sounded like a guess when he said it.

Bill nodded and typed something. “Alright, pizza’s on it’s wuh- way. Not a Hawaiian fan?” It took Stan a second to realize Bill was just talking to him, and the realization made him feel fluttery and uncertain in himself.

This was exactly why he hated being around cute guys: he always seemed to make a fool of himself. And cute guys that were also incredibly nice, and ordered him pizza? Even worse.

“I like the pineapple, just - there’s ham on it.”

Bill paused, and Stan could see his brain connecting the dots for just a moment before his mouth dropped open in surprise. “Oh shuh- shit! That’s - that’s absolutely a pig! Sorry, I guess I focus s- so much on

the pineapple . . .”

“It’s fine,” Stan said, if only because Bill sounded genuinely remorseful. “It’s kind of the talking point, I guess.”

“And where do you stand on it?” Bill asked, head tilted curiously. There was something in how he asked all these questions that made it seem like he was actually interested in the answer. Stan couldn’t tell if he was just a naturally nosy person, or if it was an extension of the Bill Denbrough Kindness Complex, but it still made Stan feel warm all the way through to his fingertips and toes. It was an attentiveness he liked from Richie or Bev, but wished could come from someone who wasn’t so strictly platonic.

“I like it. It’s good with banana peppers, actually.”

“Pineapple and b- banana peppers?” Bill sounded exactly like Stan had the first time Richie had presented him with his ideal pizza topping concoction.

“Yeah, a friend of mine introduced me to it, and I know it sounds awful, but pineapple, banana peppers, and green peppers is surprisingly palatable.”

Bill’s mouth turned up into one of those half-smiles he kept giving Stan, and Stan was trying *so hard* to keep his cool, but Bill was making it *so difficult*. “Then I guess the next time w- we order pizza, I can try it with you.”

Next time? Stan was almost embarrassed at the thrill of excitement that ran through him at the thought. Bill was right next door, and he wasn’t at all helpful, and he wanted to order pizza again together eventually.

Hardly half a day into this holiday, and things were already beginning to slip out of his control.

The game Bill had brought was a multiplayer, and Stan spent the entire night discovering just how fun and lovely a little family Eddie had made himself a part of. Mike was kind and his brownies were,

true to expectations, spectacular. Ben was quiet and sweet and had a self conscious wit about him that was genuinely hilarious. And Bill . .

Bill was exactly what Stan had assumed he was when he stepped through Eddie's door, and even more.

The next morning, Stan found himself waking up to the sunlight filtering through the window of Eddie's small, cozy bedroom. He rolled over and scrabbled awkwardly for his phone for a moment, and switched it on to check the time: ten sixteen.

Stan sat up and stretched, body sore from an unfamiliar mattress but satisfied from such a deep, dreamless sleep. It had been a long time since Stan had let himself wake up naturally, without an alarm jolting him back into the world. Padding down the stairs to the kitchen, he let himself enjoy the feeling; he doubted he'd want to do this for the whole holiday, but perhaps once in a while was good for him, as Richie often claimed. Though Richie did it *every* day, so maybe the key was less about sleep and more about balance. Neither of them were very good at that, and they were both some form of disaster it seemed, so the theory felt to Stan like it held some weight.

He set about making a cup of tea, fumbling with Eddie's old gas stove to heat up water in an old-fashioned kettle, and scouring the cupboards to find Eddie's stash of teabags. He made a mental note to pick up some more to replace them before he left.

Settling into Eddie's incredibly comfortable armchair with his cup of lady grey tea and the novel he had abandoned the previous night, Stan took in a deep breath of the still, quiet air of the house. It felt content.

He smiled to himself and reopened his book.

Three hours flitted by, but Stan hardly noticed them; he found himself absorbed wholly in his book, moving through the chapters as though afraid someone might snatch it away from him. Elijah Lewis, mystery thriller expert, had outdone himself with *One Moment Was*

All . Stan had also guessed the murderer correctly, which gave him an odd sense of pride.

“Oh, calm down,” he said to himself, rolling his eyes. “You figured out a fictional murder, you didn’t solve the Black Dahlia case.” He tried not to wonder how ridiculous he must have seemed, talking to himself alone in someone else’s house, still in his pyjamas at two in the afternoon.

The knock at the door startled him from his thoughts, and Stan hurried to open it. Bill was standing on the other side, and his face split into a bright smile when he saw Stan.

“How’ve you been, neighbour?”

Stan nodded, unsure if his sudden lightheadedness was just in his imagination, or if being in such close proximity to Bill was actually dangerous for his health. He decided he didn’t really care.

Stan also realized that he had just been nodding in response to Bill’s question for half a minute or so, and hurried to let him inside the house while scrambling for an answer. “I’m good - definitely good. Just, you know, good.” Would he ever finish a proper sentence when talking to Bill one-on-one? Because he sure would like to.

“That’s good,” Bill said, stripping off his coat and taking a seat on the same couch cushion as he had the night before. Stan wondered if that was Bill’s Spot, and if he and Eddie were close enough for that to be an established thing. He looked so at home in this place, so right, that it wasn’t hard to believe he had his own designated spot.

“Anyway, I was w- wondering - oh!” Stan followed Bill’s gaze to the book now resting on the coffee table, cover facing up. “You’re reading this?”

“Yes, I - it’s good. I’ve been meaning to read it for a while.” There, that was a full sentence!

“W- wicked! So you’re liking it so far?”

“Yeah, it’s definitely my favourite of Lewis’ books, but *Plum Orchard* is still great. Have you read it?”

Bill smiled a bit sheepishly, and shrugged. "I have, sort of. I edited-ed it."

For a moment, Stan just stared at Bill, who stared right back. Then, when he found his voice again, he let out a strained "You what?"

Bill nodded. "I edited this one. I w- work at Lyon's House - I'm a junior editor, I don't do the s- super big works or anything. This was, like, the most intense assignment I've had, actually. I love muh-mysteries, so it was kind of incredible, because I mean it's *Elijah Lewis*, you know?"

"That's . . ." Stan shook his head, collecting his thoughts. "Wow. Was it - I mean, was it this good as a first draft?"

Bill's eyes sparkled. "It was *incredible* ."

Stan had to physically stop himself from saying something ridiculous, like ' *you're incredible* .' Instead, he took a seat next to Bill on the couch and said, "I need you to tell me about him."

So Bill did. An hour flew by, with Bill explaining what Elijah Lewis, one of the most reclusive mystery authors in contemporary literature, was like, what his drafts felt like to read, all his strokes of genius. Bill even flipped through to a particular chapter and pointed out specific scenes that he had had a hand in crafting, and Stan found himself entranced. The way he talked about the process of writing was captivating; he had such a way with words that Stan had no real trouble believing him to be a writer. It seemed natural, enough so that Stan could picture him in action: sweater sleeves rolled up, rereading a manuscript chapter, brow furrowed intently. The image alone made Stan honest-to-god swoon. He was *swooning*, like a lovesick middle schooler. God help him.

"That's . . . wow."

"Yeah, tell me about it." Bill laughed. Then his whole face shifted, a thought dawning in his eyes. "I to- tuh- tally forgot, I came to see if you w- wanted to get lunch or something? There's a cafe nearby that Eddie loves."

The question, asked with enough hope in Bill's voice that Stan knew he couldn't have said no if he wanted to, took him slightly off guard. He blinked, confused, and wondered for a second if Bill Denbrough had just asked him on a date. Then he decided that he didn't want to know either way.

"Oh, um . . . yeah? Sure? I wasn't . . . yeah."

"Yeah?" Bill grinned. "Sweet."

Stan nodded and stood from the couch, ready to march right out that front door and into whatever adventure Bill wanted to take him on, before he remembered what he was wearing.

"I'm going to, um, change first if that's cool," Stan said, gesturing to his pyjamas, already inching toward the stairs.

"A sh- shame," Bill said, expression sincere. "I thought those w- were definitely your colour."

Stan turned and darted up to the safety of the bedroom before Bill could see the blush creeping over his face.

Lunch with Bill turned out to be in a small, sweet cafe that smelled strongly of mocha and had tiny Christmas trees on every spindly-legged table. They ordered at the counter: an americano for Stan, a peppermint latte for Bill, and what Bill assured him was the best veggie curry pie in the world. Stan took one seat, and Bill took the other, and the world felt small in a way that Stan hadn't realized he could like.

"So," Bill said, leaning forward as though to ask something momentous. "How do you feel about horror?"

Stan's face twisted, confused, and he drummed an even rhythm on the tabletop as he thought. "You mean the genre or the concept?"

"The genre," Bill said with a small laugh.

"Oh. I don't mind it - I hated it as a kid, but it's grown on me. Why?

Do you edit those, too?”

“I write them actually.”

Oh, that image of Bill In His Element had just become even more tantalizing in the wildness of Stan’s imagination.

“Oh?” He thought he sounded quite cool and collected for someone thinking about the things that he was.

Bill nodded, his eyes dropping to the table. He fingered a tiny ornament on their tiny Christmas tree, and Stan watched the little jingle bell shine before looking back at Bill’s shy, uncertain figure.

“Have you been published? Or is it a work in progress?”

“Oh, um, I’ve been pretty thoroughly published,” Bill said with a small chuckle. “I, uh . . . have you ever read anything by William King?”

Stan’s eyebrows flew to his hairline, not sure if what Bill was implying could possibly be the truth. He had to be misunderstanding, right? “I mean, definitely, yes. I haven’t read everything he’s put out, but I liked *Dead Water* . . .” Stan wasn’t sure if he should elaborate on just how much he had “liked” *Dead Water* , which was a lot. Carefully-highlight-favourite-passages kind of “like.” Accidentally-burn-Cody’s-turtle-cookies-because-you-were-too-wrapped-up-in-the-book kind of “like.”

Stan was glad he hadn’t elaborated when Bill said, “I, uh . . . I’m William King. So, thanks. I’m glad you liked it.”

Bill Denbrough wrote *Dead Water* ? He had sat there, in this maybe-fictional office that Stan had crafted in his mind, and written the words that had won a Nebula and a solid four stars from Stan on Goodreads? Every thought racing through Stan’s brain had started to end in a question mark?

“You’re kidding?”

Bill shook his head, looking up to lock eyes with Stan, and he relished the slight flush on Bill’s cheeks. There was something about

that hint of shyness, Bill's modest confidence in his own work, that made Stan sit up a bit straighter, pay more attention. He wanted to see what else Bill was confident in.

"Nah, I - it's good that you liked it. This would've been so awkward if you'd hated it," he said, laughing to himself. "Although, maybe that would've been funny. Awkward, but, like, kind of funny."

"What if I did secretly hate it?" Stan asked, wondering when exactly he began flirting like a playful teenager taking a stab at witty banter.

"I really hope you don't," Bill said as a tired-looking waitress appeared at their table, bearing the coffees they'd ordered. He watched Stan over the reach of her arm, and Stan felt his heart thump loudly under the scrutiny of that gaze.

"I don't," Stan assured him, taking a long, pointed sip of his Americano. "But who knows? I haven't read any of your other books. *Dead Water* could be the exception. How do I know they aren't awful?"

Bill was still smiling, and the corner of Stan's mouth curled up in response.

"You're just gonna have to trust me on that, I guess."

Stan was officially certain of one thing: he had an idea of what he'd like to do on his impromptu holiday. And it had something - or rather, everything - to do with trusting Bill Denbrough.

Notes for the Chapter:

so apparently i can't stay away from this fic for longer than a day, so i guess enjoy the uber-frequent chapter updates for now lmao

also everyone who has left kudos/commented has been so sweet, tysm for reading this and sending some love for it my way, it's seriously so appreciated <3 <3

and btw i, much like bill, did not remember that hawaiian pizza had ham on it until halfway through

that scene - and i, like richie, enjoy pineapple/
banana pepper pizza, like an absolute monster. it's a
rad combination of sweet and spicy, and i will not
apologize.

i'm currently writing a draft for a Very Cute
Romantic Scene With Kissing atm, so enjoy
speculating about who and when and how and where
lmao <3 <3

also hmu on tumblr @thatsjustfangtastic if u want to
chat or yell or both <3 <3

4. everyday's a holiday (when i'm near to you)

Eddie was sizing Richie up as he pleaded with him in Stan's living room.

"Movie night! It's a real thing we do! Call Stan, he'll back me up!"

"Alright then," Eddie said flatly, getting up from the couch to reach for his phone on the coffee table. At the very last second, just as Eddie rang Stan's cell number, Richie lunged forward and pushed Eddie back into the couch cushions.

"What the fuck!" Eddie wriggled beneath Richie's lanky but significant weight, trying to stop Richie from wrestling the phone from his hand. "What's wrong with you?!"

"Okay, so maybe he won't back me up!" Richie shouted. He shouted most things, Eddie was beginning to notice; his default setting seemed to be camp counselor, or some other obscene volume setting that Eddie could despise.

"So there is no movie night!" Eddie exclaimed, hanging up the unfinished call. "Ugh, God, get off of me!"

Richie relented, slinking back onto his side of the couch with a groan. "Whatever, so there's no real movie night. Not, like, a scheduled one. But!" He shouted before Eddie could get a word in, which Eddie scowled at. "Stan has, like, a great home theatre system and shit, and you've never seen *Love, Actually*!"

Eddie rolled his eyes. "Oh my God, why are you so hung up on this -?"

"Because it's a classic, Eds -"

"Don't call me that."

"- and it's a literal catastrophe that you've never seen it." Richie, ever the dramatic, slid off the couch and onto his knees in front of Eddie, hands clasped, eyes wide and pleading. " *Please* , Spaghetti. It's life-changing, I promise."

“What if I don’t want my life changed?” Eddie asked, but there was no bite to it; he couldn’t fit any in while he looked at Richie *like that* . How did he make his eyes so big and gleaming, so convincingly pretending that changing Eddie’s life for the better through British romcoms was the only thing he cared about in the world?

“Trust me, you will not regret this.”

Eddie paused, trying not to look too deeply into Richie’s soft brown eyes. He sighed, and he hadn’t even gotten his reluctant “yeah, fine, alright,” out before Richie was rocketing up from the floor and scooping him up into a hug, spinning him around.

“You won’t regret this!” Richie said again as he set Eddie down and darted off down the hall.

Eddie just stood there for a moment, trying to remember how to breathe. Richie had picked up the habit of just moving him around, plucking him up into crushing hugs without a second thought, arms long and warm around Eddie. Eddie inhaled sharply, thinking about the impression of Richie’s hand splayed across his back. If it had sunk a little lower, if he had picked Eddie up from the backs of his thighs, his other hand -

“You coming?” Richie called from down the hall, snapping Eddie out of his reverie.

“Y- yeah!” Eddie yelled, hoping he didn’t sound too flustered. He mentally chided himself as he hurried off in the direction of Richie’s voice - this was getting ridiculous. How was he meant to spend the next week in LA with Richie if he kept acting like a stupid little kid with a crush? Richie was a desperate flirt with a cute smile, but that didn’t mean he was actually interested in someone like Eddie. Getting his hopes up every time Richie so much as touched him was a path to certain misery, and Eddie knew it. Not to mention the odd sense of betrayal that came with the idea of living in Stan’s house, and trying to sleep with his best friend in it. From Eddie’s brief impressions of Stan, he didn’t seem as though he would like Richie’s sex life anywhere near his furniture. So, yeah, no - sleeping with Richie was an awful idea that Eddie doubted both the possibility and ethics of.

But when he walked into Stan's entertainment room, chalk full of movies and books, and found Richie sprawled gracelessly across the pull-out couch, Eddie couldn't help but mourn the impossibility of it. The fabric of Richie's obnoxious Godzilla t shirt was riding up, and Eddie could see the softness of his stomach, how smooth the skin there looked. Cuddled up among the pillows and blankets, Richie looked positively adorable, and Eddie fought back a groan of frustration as he perched himself on the edge of the couch a safe distance away.

"I swear, I can't believe you've never seen this one - hey, what're you doin' all the way over there?" And Richie, with all 206 touchy-feely bones in his body, gently tugged Eddie further onto the couch by his arm. He settled mere inches from Eddie, who could have screamed. He could feel the warmth of Richie's body right next to his, and longed to lean closer into him. But that would have crossed several lines that Eddie couldn't let himself even look at, so he kept his hands primly in his lap and stared straight ahead at the screen as Richie pressed play on the movie.

As it turned out, Richie was right about *Love, Actually* being an absolute classic - Eddie could let himself get swept up in emotional Christmas nonsense long enough to almost forget about who he was next to. But then that peace would be punctured by Richie fidgeting, as he did so often, and nudging Eddie's knee or his thigh or his arm, and the proximity would send butterflies erupting in Eddie's stomach all over again. They were barely through the first half hour, and he was already acting like an absolute idiot.

But those feelings were nothing compared to what his heart did when Richie suddenly slung his arm along the back of the couch, right behind Eddie. They weren't quite touching - there was a very important inch or two of empty space between Richie's arm and Eddie's shoulders - but that space was filled with the mutual warmth of their bodies, the electric knowledge that they were so close. It struck Eddie just how much this must have looked like two teenagers in a movie, but reenacted as awkwardly as possible. He decided he didn't care, just for this moment, about being childish; this felt too good, too temptingly comfortable.

Then Richie said, "So, is Alan Rickman a dill in this, or what?" and

the electricity dissipated and left Eddie at a loss for words for all of a nanosecond before he shoved Richie face-first into a pillow.

“God, you legally *cannot* say that about Professor Snape!” Eddie exclaimed.

“Why not? I think I should be allowed to express my perfectly healthy sexual fantasies, and maybe -”

“God, don’t!”

“- *maybe* Alan Rickman is one of them!”

“That’s nasty, Richie, he’s, like, a total asshole here!” Eddie argued, frowning and pointing at the screen, where Alan Rickman was actively cheating on his loving wife for all to see. “What about him breaking Emma Thompson’s heart is *sexy* to you?”

“Hey, isn’t she Professor Trelawny?”

“. . . don’t even go there, Richie. Don’t - what are you searching - oh, God, no! I don’t want to see that!”

Richie squawked a laugh, shoving his phone at Eddie’s face. The art on the screen made Eddie grimace. “Why not? Is it because they’re old? Because I think that qualifies as ageism or something, Eds.”

“Quit calling me that,” Eddie said, no matter how much he was coming to accept that he was fighting a losing battle on the nicknames. “And it’s not ageism, it’s just - please. *God* .”

“Okay, okay . . .” Richie relented, returning his phone to the arm of the couch and looking back at the movie. “Oh, shit, you’re missing one of the best parts! Look, okay, so Hugh Grant is like the President of England -”

“Shut up, you know for a fact that they’re called Prime Ministers.”

“- and his secretary - it’s the best one. Hands down, best subplot here.”

“Okay,” Eddie said, fighting a grin at Richie’s excitement. “So let me

watch it.”

“You got it, Spaghetti Man, I’m -” he mimed zipping his lips, then mouthed the word ‘quiet’. Eddie tried not to pay too close attention to the way his lips moved, or else he would still be too distracted from Hugh Grant.

“I’m not really into Alan Rickman, you know,” Richie said, his voice light and casual, as the movie wound to a close. “I was just fuckin’ around.”

“I only hoped,” Eddie said, rolling his eyes.

“I’m much more into the Juliet type - Miss Keira Knightley’s character,” Richie said. Eddie turned to find Richie looking directly at him, and flushed slightly under the warm intensity of his gaze. “You know: argumentative, witty, oddly endearing, very cute.”

Eddie was glad that he wasn’t a chronic blusher - not the way Ben was, anyhow. But he still felt oddly warm as Richie’s words wound their way around his brain. He wasn’t sure Richie was talking about him - he wasn’t *argumentative* - but the sudden steadiness of his gaze on Eddie said something different.

“I like Hugh Grant,” Eddie said, because he needed to say something and stop sitting there like an idiot. “He’s always so . . . he’s an idiot and says the wrong thing and still manages to, you know . . . steal your heart a bit. Or,” he added hastily, fidgeting with the blanket, “the, uh, the girl’s heart.”

“But he was the worst in Bridget Jones!”

“Oh, definitely,” Eddie agreed without hesitation. “Colin Firth is the Hugh Grant of that movie. He says the wrong thing, but he still - he cares. That’s the point.”

“I think you’re basing your Hugh Grant impression on exactly one movie he’s ever been in,” Richie said, tone lifting in joking suspicion.

“You don’t know what movies I’ve seen!” Eddie shot back.

"I know at least one," Richie countered, jerking his chin at the tv. "And I can piece the rest together for myself."

"Yeah? You some kind of detective or something?"

"You betcha, Watson! It's quite elementary!" Richie said, mangling the words with one of the worst British accents Eddie had ever heard.

"God, that was bad. How do you think that *that* sounds anything like what we just watched?!"

"I don't know what you're talking about, old boy!" Richie cried, cackling.

"I think Bev was right. There's no way you're actually that bad, this has to be intentional."

Richie winked, and Eddie felt that warmth run through him again. "Putting a lot of faith in me there, Eds."

"Don't . . . ugh," Eddie groaned, dropping backwards to lay on the couch, arms crossed. His push back against the nicknames had been a war, and he was almost certain he had lost. "Whatever."

"So, did you wanna do something else?"

Eddie looked at Richie out of the corner of his eye, confused. "Don't you . . . I mean, you don't have anything better to do than hang out with a stranger? I thought you, you know, 'worked in comedy'?"

A slight spasm crossed Richie's face, quick and awful, and Eddie felt a pang of regret for how annoyed the question had actually come out; he hadn't meant to upset him. He genuinely was curious, given the truly absurd amount of time Richie had spent at Stan's house just lounging around with him, and eating takeout (and two reluctant salads, because Eddie insisted he couldn't get by on burritos and egg rolls alone; he tried not to think too much on Richie's promise that he absolutely could, and had for years).

But before he could begin to give him one of his patented Awkward Apologies, Richie snorted. "I write material for other people, mostly -

that is, I'm doin' that until I get my own Netflix special or something. So, like, right now I'm just working on some material for some guy that's due, like, next Friday. I can work on it whenever, it's all good. I'm all yours, Eds."

"Meaning you're going to be hanging around for the rest of my holiday?" Eddie asked, face scrunched up in displeasure, but he was having a hard time fully keeping the small smile off of his face. *I'm all yours* .

"Yep! I'm gonna be right here to make sure you have a waaaaayyyyy better Christmas than you would in Boston. What d'you guys have for Christmas over there, anyway? Snow storms and, like, related car accidents?"

Eddie snorted. "I mean, that's not entirely off-base. But the snow is nice! And - and -"

"And the *cold* ? Is the *cold* nice, Eddie?!"

"Maybe it is!" Eddie wasn't sure why he was so determined to defend Boston; it wasn't his hometown, or even a place he was desperately attached to. But it had been the backdrop to his first taste of independence and new family. That horrific cold had been present at every best moment with him, Bill, Ben and Mike - it was a neighbour that he didn't like, but could definitely count on. "And we have actual Christmas trees, real ones, and gingerbread, and the Christmas tree in the city, the really big one, and things are cozy! We do cozy so well!"

"Cozy?" Richie echoed, smirking. "Well, I'm not sure we can compete in the 'cozy' department. But I can assure you, Mr. Kaspbrak, that LA is going to show you the true meaning of the holidays."

"Which is?"

Richie leaned forward, and splayed his hands, wiggling his fingers dramatically. "*Cheap consumerism* ."

"Jesus Christ -"

"Oh, he has, like, nothing to do with this holiday, angel, I promise."

“How much of this is going to be what your Netflix special sounds like?”

Richie grinned, bright enough to nearly blind Eddie. “Oh, most of it. Although, I’m starting to think about including a new accent I’ve been working on.” He dramatically cleared his throat, as Eddie groaned. “Ah’m goin’ to an absolute rippah tonight, ma, it’s gonna be wicked pissa -”

Eddie lunged over and clapped both hands over Richie’s face, yelling, “Oh, shut the *fuck* up, Richie, you know I don’t sound like that!”

Richie laughed, a deep, peeling laugh that seemed to start in his belly and move all through him. He reeled back, swatting Eddie’s hands away from his face, cheeks going pink from laughter. “I didn’t say it was *you* , you narcissist!”

“Fuck you, that’s not even how you use *wicked pissa* ,” Eddie huffed, sitting back to glare at Richie, who was only just winding down from his laughing fit. “Yeah, ha ha, *very* funny, just yuck it up, asshole.”

Richie sighed, wiping a non-existent tear of mirth from his eye. Eddie was almost certain by this point that he had been in theatre in high school - there were very few other explanations for how absurdly dramatic he was at all times.

“Eddie?”

“Yeah?”

“Ya wanna make suppah -”

“I’ll kill you.”

Richie beamed at him, and Eddie just glared. His heart thudded heavily, though, always determined to betray him. “Nah, you’d never.”

Notes for the Chapter:

so, because i have chapters four & five already finished, i’m gonna post everything i’ve got for now

bc i hate sitting on finished stuff for too long. then i'm gonna start less frequent but consistent updates, bc i have to refocus on the four papers i have due for class in the next few weeks lmao.

tysm to everyone who's been reading so far, you've all been the absolute sweetest!!

so the next stenbrough chapter will go up after a bit of editing, and then i'll start updating this story maybe every few days??? hopefully that's okay with everybody reading <3 <3

also: will there be later metatextual nonsense where eddie and richie wind up in a love actually au inside of a holiday au???? perhaps !! who knows !! i definitely don't !! but i guess the more christmas movies crammed into one fic, the cozier, right?

5. o christmas tree (how lovely)

Stan had spent two days thinking about Bill's eyes, and reading his words. And he had managed, in those two days, to become positively enamoured.

Bill had had to head into work during this time, leaving Stan to his own devices in Eddie's house. And make no mistake, Stan was making the utmost of this alone time. He tried three different recipes, two of which (mushroom risotto and coconut korma) turned out decently (Stan wasn't ready to think about the state of his ratatouille). He spent a whole two hours just dusting and listening to a podcast about whales, which felt fantastic. He had named five of the neighbourhood squirrels, each one after a different bird. (His favourite squirrel was an especially fat grey one that scampered back and forth on Eddie's front steps. It was called Emu, and once ran face-first into a tree instead of climbing up it.)

Oh, and he had read all of Bill's books. This wasn't exactly difficult, as William King was decently-known but still somewhat fresh blood in the industry. He had four published works, and was reported to have a fifth on the way, though no one had any details yet.

Stan downloaded all three of Bill's other books onto his tablet, and devoured them all. Bill was *good*, that was certain; William King had netted himself two Nebulas and a Hugo nomination for a reason. But Stan still found himself astonished every time he pieced together the voice in these novels, and the cute pizza-ordering, flannel-wearing, cable-box-dropping guy next door. It felt too odd, too unreal, but it must have been true - Bill had shown him an email from his own editor after Stan had joked for the third time about not quite believing him.

This meant that there was a side to Bill that matched this voice perfectly, that held this kind of tension and brilliance and poignancy. There was more to Bill to find, and Stan was certain he wanted to try.

This desire had to be checked, though. Stan knew what their situation was: temporary neighbours who would never see each other again

after Stan flew back to LA. They were a passing connection. Stan couldn't help but wonder if this was for the better: being just a glimpse, a fun, bright adventure for Bill, might be better than any long-term connection with Stan. He had flown across the country on a vacation to *dust someone else's house*, for fuck's sake. He was the kind of person who panicked when they ran into a cute guy in any circumstances out of their control, and fucked up a dish that was nothing more than tomatoes baked in a dish, and hadn't cried over a movie or book since childhood. *It's like you don't feel anything at all*.

So, Stan wasn't exactly boyfriend material - half of LA's gay bachelors could apparently attest to that. But that didn't mean that he wasn't excellent holiday fling material.

There was a knock on his door at six pm, and Stan forced himself to walk casually to answer it, and not sprint like he wanted to.

Bill was standing on the other side, with two surprises: one, an enormous cardboard box cradled in his arms, filled with shiny, glittery things. And two, a small child.

"Merry Christmas!" The kid, who barely came up to Stan's ribs, grinned at him with a startling brightness that reminded him of someone he couldn't quite figure out. He wore a hat shaped awkwardly like a moose's head, googly eyes staring up at Stan as well, and his very freckled cheeks were already flushed from the cold.

"Oh, and happy Hanukkah!" He tacked this on clumsily, though he wasn't done. "And Kwanzaa, and Solstice, and Three Kings Day, and St. Lucia Day!"

"He googled international winter holidays before we came over," Bill said with a bemused half-smile. "Oh, and he's my little brother."

"I'm Georgie," Georgie said, already walking past Stan and into Eddie's house. He took off his snowy boots and placed them next to the door with the familiarity of practice. "And Bill said you're Stan and Jewish and cool."

Super cool . Stan felt himself smiling at the memory.

“He’s definitely right about two of those things,” he said, watching as Georgie scurried over to the couch and climbed up onto it. He turned to Bill, who was still standing on the front steps. “Are you coming in, too, or . . .?”

“Yeah!” Bill jumped over the threshold, toeing off his shoes before he dramatically placed the box onto the coffee table as though it held a great treasure. “This is our token for admission into your abode, sir.”

Stan snorted, glancing inside the box. He slowly reached in and lifted out a long string of shimmering silvery garland, decorated with tiny blue stars of David. He turned to Bill with one eyebrow raised in question, and Bill shrugged.

“I know Eddie has, you know, the World’s Saddest Christmas Tree -” he gestured to the fake evergreen tucked into the corner of the living room, undecorated apart from four individual ornaments of different skating penguins, and a long string of red beads that hung, abandoned, from a single plastic branch, “- but I figured it’d be more fun to decorate one yourself. And I was at a Dollar Tree, and they had a whole section of *this* , and I would’ve been a monster not to do this to you.”

“And what are you for doing it to me?” Stan asked, trying not to think too hard about the innuendo that they had both let slip.

Bill laughed. “A terrible neighbour, but excellent friend.”

Friend . Christ, he was going to kill Stan, wasn’t he? “Well then, it’s a good thing you did it.”

“Are we gonna do the tree now?” Georgie demanded from his precarious perch on the back of the couch, watching Bill and Stan. The way he was impatiently rocking, threatening to fall right off the couch, was making Stan very nervous, so he gave a hasty “Yeah, definitely” just to avoid seeing a small child face plant on Eddie’s wood floor.

Bill must’ve also not been a fan of Georgie’s impatience, because he

agreed wholeheartedly and hauled the box over to the World's Saddest Christmas Tree. He glanced over his shoulder at Stan and nodded him over. "Come on, then, let's get going!"

They started with some old multicoloured lights Bill had dug out of storage - "I can't believe they still work, honestly," Bill said, as Georgie scrambled for the clunky old remote to switch them to the awful strobe setting with the unbridled glee unique to troublesome children. Georgie had explained that he was almost twelve, and therefore not a child, but Stan had to disagree.

"So, all of this was at Dollar Tree?" Stan asked as he plucked out an ornament of an otter in a blue-and-white sweater.

Bill shrugged, looking a little too invested in the placement of his plastic, ice-fishing polar bear. "I mean, a couple of them. Different stuff at different stores."

Stan felt a pang at the revelation: Bill had braved the aisles of multiple Dollar Trees just to find him Hanukkah decorations. That was the sweetest and most ridiculous thing anyone had done for him . . . well, almost ever. Other than the time Richie and Bev had conspired to make him a birthday cake model of an owl that Richie had stuck real feathers to, or tricked La Fiesta into playing ABBA for an hour straight after his first major breakup in LA, Stan couldn't remember someone putting so much effort into making him happy.

But Georgie was suddenly lunging forward from the couch with a small box of glitter, that he let rain over the tree and both Stan and Bill, and so Stan had little time to dwell on Bill's inexplicable kindness.

"Georgie!" Bill scolded, though he was clearly fighting down a laugh. "You can get the broom to clean this up."

Georgie groaned, loud and long and very dramatic, but went to the cupboard in the kitchen for the broom.

"Sorry about the mess," Bill said, turning to Stan. There were thick flecks of glitter on his cheeks, and his eyes seemed brighter than usual, sparkling along with the rest of him. "He'll clean it, I promise."

"It's fine," Stan assured, running a hand through his curls; glitter fluttered around him, dusting his shoulders and fuzzy socks. "I - it's fine. We'll clean it up, don't worry." He decided that he liked the sound of a "we" - Stan&Bill - far too much.

"He just gets so . . . *excitable* ," Bill said, as Georgie came sock-sliding back into the living room with broom in hand.

"I can see that."

Georgie grinned and started swiping the broom wildly across the floor, whooshing glitter into the air in sparkling flurries. It danced around their feet, settling beautifully on Bill's reindeer socks.

"That's not clean," Bill chided his brother, but Georgie just rolled his eyes.

"No, but it's *festive* ! Stan likes it, right?" He turned his big brown eyes on Stan, who glanced nervously back and forth between the two Denbroughs. God, he wished he was better with kids; maybe then he'd know if wanting the glitter off the floor was an unreasonable thing to insist to a tiny, rambunctious human.

"Um," Stan stammered.

Bill rescued him. (And wow did he appreciate how reassuring Bill's presence was among the sudden eccentricities of Eddie's family). "You still gotta clean it up, dude. If you do," he added, as Georgie looked ready to vouch for his decorating choices some more, "I'll go next door and grab some hot chocolate."

Georgie seemed to weigh this option considerably, looking down at the glittery mess around their feet. Then he looked up at Bill and said, "Fine. Add marshmallows."

"Obviously."

And with that promised, Georgie got to sweeping up the glitter, shoos Stan and Bill out of his way with pokes of the broom. "Go get my hot chocolate, William."

"Alrighty then!" Bill said, rolling his eyes, though Stan didn't think he

looked that annoyed. "I'll be right back, and we can get to finishing the tree."

"Maybe Stan could go with you? Just to, like, get out of the way," Georgie said, looking at Stan expectantly.

Stan turned his gaze to Bill, who shrugged at him. "You wanna come?"

"Uh . . . sure?" Stan glanced at Georgie, who was watching the floor intently as he swept and decidedly not looking at either of them. "Okay."

So he slipped on his shoes and followed Bill to the brownstone right next door, less than ten feet away. Bill unlocked and opened the door, and the pair of them stepped inside the awaiting warmth; even a few moments outside was enough to sting Stan's cheeks.

He had barely gotten inside the entryway of Bill's house when he found his path forward blocked by the sturdy, flannel-clad chest of Bill himself. He stood hardly a foot away from Stan, and he could pick out the flecks of green and gray in his blue eyes from this distance, the handful of freckles on the bridge of his nose that had turned faint from the wintery sunlight. Stan felt his breath catch in his throat for just a second, and bit his lip.

This was apparently the best thing he could have done, because Bill glanced down at his mouth and let out a low, breathy sigh that sent a shiver racing down Stan's spine. They had become a series of reactions to each other, the proximity syncing their movements as naturally as thought, as breathing.

Bill tugged on the hem of his flannel, eyes not moving from Stan's mouth, and said in a voice Stan had not heard from him before, "I want to do s- something, but only if you w- want to."

"Yeah?" Stan wondered when his throat had gone so dry, his reply coming out raspy and quiet.

"*Yeah .*"

Bill leaned over and kissed him.

It was a fleeting, searing kiss. It ended too quickly, but left such an impression on Stan's mouth that he was certain if he looked in the mirror it would be branded with the shell-pink of Bill's lips.

"Uh - I - uh -" Stan stammered, and swallowed hard under the sudden, heavily-lidded look Bill was watching him with. He was even closer now, inches from Stan's face. Stan's mouth. It wouldn't take much to lean forward and do *that* all over again.

So he did. Bill's lips were a bit chapped, but pliant under Stan's much longer, more languid kiss. The way they moved against his sent heat spiking through Stan's body, electrifying his chest, pooling in his stomach.

This time they both pulled away, and Stan couldn't help the smirk that curled his mouth. God, kissing Bill felt even better than he had thought it might.

"Are you . . . d- did you, maybe w- want to, you know, do that again?"

Stan's smirk grew, and he felt like the stupid Grinch with his growing heart. His sexual confidence had just gained three sizes, or some nonsense. "Yeah. But, maybe later. After hot chocolate."

After hot chocolate, it turned out, involved Georgie falling asleep on Eddie's couch.

"It's not a first," Bill assured him, voice hushed, as he gently pulled an old throw blanket over his brother. "And it probably w- won't be the last time. He crashes wherever, w- whenever."

Stan just nodded, turning to look back at the Hanukkah tree the three of them had managed to cobble together. It was a complete mess: Stan had meticulously strung the three different blue-and-white garlands around it, along with the old multicoloured lights. Georgie's glitter shone in patches everywhere, and the branches were weighed down by the ridiculous amount of ornaments Bill had managed to

find - Stan's secret favourite was the flat disk that had a "neutral holiday armadillo" staring out at him from its glossy surface.

"I think I should probably tell you," Stan whispered, glancing back at Bill. "Hanukkah bushes are an established thing, sort of."

"Oh shuh- shit, really?" Bill padded over to stand next to Stan, and the pair of them turned their eyes back to the glimmering monstrosity they'd created.

"Yeah. I mean, it's complicated - a lot of people still don't want them - but it happens." He made a show of dragging his eyes up and down their tree, surveying it with pursed lips. "This will do, though."

"That's good." He nearly jumped when the back of Bill's hand suddenly bumped against the back of his own. He let Bill take his hand, and looked over. His whole face bathed in the glitter and light of the tree, he looked practically angelic. "Did you . . . did you want to pick up where w- we left off, earlier?"

That same heat began to pool in Stan's chest when he thought about "earlier", and just how inviting Bill's mouth looked in the dim light of Eddie's living room. He nodded, smiling a small, private smile. "Absolutely."

Bill turned, hand still wrapped around Stan's, and guided him up the stairs, into Eddie's bedroom. He dropped Stan's hand to shut the door with a decisive *snap*, and turned the lock for good measure. Then he turned around to face Stan, who had simply stood, waiting for wherever exactly Bill wanted to pick up from.

He started by unbuttoning his flannel, which dropped to the floor, and reached out to slip Stan's shirt over his head and hang it over the edge of the bed. The lights in the bedroom were off, but the streetlight filtering through the window lit the bare expanse of Bill's torso with pale light. His eyes were two glimmering pinpricks in the darkness, but reemerged in all their enchanting glory the closer he stepped to Stan; when they stood chest to chest he kept walking, moving Stan backwards until the backs of his knees hit the mattress.

"Are you okay w- with this?" Bill asked. His whisper carried through

the tense air like a shout, and it brushed warm breath against Stan's cheek.

"Yes. I'm - yes. Absolutely." Stan laughed softly, almost to himself. "I've been okay with this since we I saw you."

Bill laughed, too, and ran a careful fingertip over Stan's collarbones; Stan shivered. "Same. I just - you're cute. I w- wanted to know how cute you'd b- be like this."

"Like what?" Stan breathed.

"Like you're ready for m- me. Like you w- want what I w- want."

"Which is?"

Bill smirked, and the movement of his lips made Stan practically infuriated that they weren't on any part of him right that second. "Someone t- to have fun w- with. Someone to tuh- touch you like this." He dragged a hand down Stan's bare back, and he had to catch his whine in his throat. "You know?"

"Someone to have fun with," Stan echoed.

"You c- came here to get aw- way from stuff, right?" Bill's hand, pressed tightly against Stan's lower back, pulled him even closer against his chest. His words fanned warm air against Stan's ear. "This c- could be a good w- way to escape. Something fun and inconsequential."

Inconsequential . That was what Stan needed to escape the lingering memory of Cody and co., to banish thoughts of failed relationships. A holiday fling. He, Stan Uris, could be excellent holiday fling material, couldn't he?

Experimentally, Stan trailed his fingernails in an arc along the warm skin of Bill's back; he heard him gasp into his ear, and bit his lip. Oh, he could definitely be good holiday fling material.

"Exactly." Stan said this with his mouth pressed to the pulse point on Bill's throat. "Inconsequential fun."

“So, w- what’re you waiting for?” Bill huffed, and the impatience in his voice made Stan grin smugly against his neck. “I’m down, you’re down, let’s j- just -”

Stan cut him off with a kiss, hard and determined. He pulled back less than an inch, eyes locked with Bill’s in the darkness. “I think it was definitely sexier when you were calling me cute, not trying to rush me.”

“*R- rush* you?” Bill hissed as Stan pressed a kiss to his jaw. “This-s is *rushing* you?”

“Yes.” Stan looked up at him through his lashes, and watched Bill’s throat work through a strangled sort of gasp.

“God, you - I hope to God you c- can buh- back up all the fuckin’ teasing you’re doing,” Bill whispered.

Stan smirked. “I guess you’ll just have to trust me.”

Notes for the Chapter:

i cannot, and will not, write smut.

so this is gonna be the last of the super-frequent updates, and the beginning of Mallow Paces Herself And Also Gets Some Sleep lmao

hope this was okay, and that no one will mind the less-frequent updates - it'll still definitely be finished by christmas, and will definitely be a priority for me <3

tysm for reading <3 <3 <3

6. what a bright time (is it the right time?)

True to his word, Richie was trying his darndest to ensure Eddie had the best LA Christmas imaginable, filled with as much nonsensical cheap holiday consumerism as possible.

He'd first introduced Eddie to the idea of Christmas Sundaes the evening of the *Love, Actually* incident. It had been ridiculously hot, even with Stan's fantastic air conditioning, and Eddie and Richie had wound up in his backyard on the patio, lounging in chairs and basking in the sticky warmth of an unusually humid evening.

The sun was just starting to dip beneath the horizon, the vivid orange sunset blooming over the sky, when Richie peeled himself off of his chair and stood with his hands on his hips, staring down at Eddie. Eddie had blinked up at him, confused and dazed from nearly nodding off. "What?"

"Come with me," Richie said without preamble, taking Eddie by the hand and hauling him to his feet. Eddie had toppled off of the chair and landed awkwardly with his elbow in Richie's side, trying to steady himself.

"God, can you not wait for anyone to move at a normal speed?" Eddie had griped as he was dragged bodily into Stan's air-conditioned kitchen.

"No," Richie said, dropping his hand and throwing open the freezer. "Because we have holiday fun to get started on immediately!"

"Holiday fun" meant Richie digging two cartons of ice cream - one peppermint, one rocky road - out of Stan's freezer, and scrounging up an assortment of toppings from cupboards that he moved through like a chattering, obnoxious hurricane.

The Christmas Sundaes had been enormous and extremely messy. Richie had insisted they were a time-honoured tradition among LA residents. "We can't have what you have in the tundra, Spaghetti! No one wants hot cocoa when it's, like, 90 degrees out! We gotta adapt!"

Eddie had raised a skeptical eyebrow. “Why do I get the feeling that by ‘LA’, you mean you and Bev?”

“Because we’re residents of Los Angeles, angel, of course that’s what I mean.”

The Sundaes were simultaneously repulsive and excellent. Peppermint ice cream was a cursed creation from where Eddie was sitting - “It’s like eating frozen toothpaste!” - but he did like rocky road, and the added marshmallows and chocolate chips were good because they were marshmallows and chocolate chips, it was hard to go wrong. Eddie had watched in horror as Richie tossed a handful of gummy worms and chocolate-covered raisins into his, and had to physically look away when he started with the crumbled gingerbread cookie and candy cane. He had pulled some of these supplies out of his bag, and Eddie couldn’t help but consider that to be criminal intent.

Richie had fallen asleep on the couch, and Eddie had watched him for a very long few minutes. There was a neatly-folded blanket on the back of the couch, and Richie was in nothing but his Godzilla t shirt and baggy board shorts. Eddie worried his lower lip between his teeth, uncertainty locking his feet in place as he tried to work out if he should put the blanket over Richie. It was just being nice, right? People did that for their friends. Bill and Ben and Mike and he did that for each other all the time. And Eddie and Richie were, to Eddie’s equal parts chagrin and happiness, friends.

Eddie wound up holding the folded blanket over Richie, trying to unfold and settle it onto him without waking him up, when Richie snuffled and turned in his sleep. Eddie had dropped the blanket and dashed from the room, collapsing into Stan’s bed with his heart practically beating out of his chest.

The next morning, things felt much calmer. Richie rolled off of the couch around eleven and Eddie, who had been up and moving since nine, watched from the door to the kitchen as Richie stretched his long arms far above his head, arching his back like a cat. He sighed, content and relaxed, and glanced over to see Eddie leaning against the doorway. Eddie started, panicking at having been caught, and busied himself with the thermostat next to him on the wall.

Richie padded over, pushing his glasses up his nose and giving him a bemused half-frown, as he watched Eddie study the buttons and dials. Stan's thermostat was barely comprehensible, and he couldn't even figure out where on it the room temperature was. A fantastic choice for an alibi, absolutely.

"You all good over here?" Richie asked, his voice soft and raspy from sleep.

"Oh! Yeah!" Eddie tried not to sound too frazzled, but didn't manage to attain the cool, calm, and collected mask he had been aiming for. "Just, you know . . . looking."

"At the thermostat?"

"Yes." Eddie didn't trust himself to elaborate, and opted to leave it at that.

"Well, alright then." Richie looked over the top of Eddie's head - which really wasn't hard, given he was at least that much taller than him - and smiled. "Were you by any chance making me *breakfast*, angel?"

"No - well - not, I mean, not technically," Eddie stammered out, and now he was definitely blushing. "I was just making breakfast in general, you nerd, not just for you."

But Richie had seized this opportunity for teasing like a dog with a chew toy - excited, and determined to enjoy it until it was torn to shreds. "I can't believe you care this much! Spaghetti, you are such a gentleman. Is that french toast?"

It was, in fact, french toast. Eddie set it out on Stan's dining table alongside some fruit and coffee, and he watched Richie devour two slices in the span of six minutes.

"Got somewhere to be?" Eddie asked, spearing a reasonably-sized piece on his fork and raising his eyebrows at Richie across the table.

Richie just grinned with a mouth full of bread and syrup, and made a huge show of swallowing the other half of his second slice. He reached for a third, and Eddie rolled his eyes.

“God, I’m glad I made extra.”

“No, Eds, *I’m* glad you made extra.” And, just to be a dick, he reached over and plucked a piece of Eddie’s toast from his plate, popping it in his mouth before Eddie could even protest. “Anyway, now that I’ve got you here -”

“I’m pretty sure *I’ve* got you here.”

“- *now that I’ve got you here* , Eduardo, I was wondering if you wanted to go out today.”

“Go out?” Eddie nearly choked on his strawberry.

“Yeah. Like, outside of the house. Because, as nice as Stanley’s place is - and don’t get me wrong, I love it, that’s why I sleep here all the time - it might be good for you to step outside for a bit.”

“I was stepping outside before you appeared and trapped me in here with *Love, Actually* and ice cream, you know.” *Oh, thank God, he meant going outside.*

“Trips to Nella’s don’t count as ‘stepping outside’,” Richie countered, licking the syrup off of his fingers.

Eddie scowled, chucking a napkin at Richie’s face. “God, quit doing that! It’s disgusting! And going to Nella’s definitely counts, *and* I was going on walks before that!”

“Okay, okay, but La Fiesta was, like, the first time you’d gone into LA proper, yeah?”

“. . . I mean, technically.”

“Alright! So! Bev is on set for something today, and I was wondering if you wanted to go visit? See some real show business action?” He waved jazz hands at Eddie. Eddie frowned.

“Bev’s on set? But she hasn’t . . .” He trailed off, uncertain just how much he could say about Bev that was more speculation than truth. So much of what he - and everyone else - knew about Beverly Marsh these days was speculative. A role on one of the most popular sitcoms

in the country when she was just five years old, a flurry of movies she starred in before she was even old enough to be in middle school, a short-lived but popular show on disney channel - all of this fame had been cut short when Beverly Marsh was just shy of fifteen, and she had vanished from the public eye without a trace. Three years later she had reappeared, having gotten her GED and living with an aunt in an LA suburb. She didn't do movies, or tv shows, or ad campaigns anymore. She popped up in grainy pap photos, mostly walking in and out of clubs and bars. No one knew what had happened, only that Beverly Marsh, child star and American darling, had disappeared. Eddie had heard the more uncomfortable rumours about her: that she had developed a crippling addiction, had been spirited off to rehab; that she had had a nervous breakdown, and was a certifiable loon now. He didn't think he liked any of these rumours.

"She's not acting," Richie said, and the quiet in his voice caught Eddie's attention. He had hardly heard him speak so levelly before, as though he didn't want any room for argument or misinterpretation. Behind his thick, ridiculous glasses, Richie's eyes were soft but serious. "She's directing."

"Oh!" Eddie smiled; the mental picture of Bev in her rumpled tank tops and combat boots, hair a messy orange halo, unlit cigarette tucked behind her ear, ordering people around on a movie set, was delightful. "That's wicked."

"Wicked?" Richie echoed, the firm line of his mouth turning up into a grin. "Some more Boston slang, there, Eds?"

"Shut up," Eddie said, with no bite whatsoever.

"Are you sure I'm not using *wicked pissa* correctly, because *I* think -"

"I said shut up!" Eddie chuckled another napkin at Richie, who just cackled.

Bev's set was loud and chaotic and not at all something Eddie was

quite prepared for, and he and Richie were still standing on the sidelines of it all.

“She said she’s in wardrobe, going over some stuff,” Richie said, reading off his phone. He looked up at Eddie, who was standing with his arms crossed tightly, foot tapping on the pavement. “You good?”

“Yeah, fine,” Eddie said, looking away from Richie. “Where’s wardrobe?”

“It is . . . that way!” Richie spun suddenly, arm sticking straight out as he pointed off into the distance. “Want a piggyback ride?”

“God, no!” Eddie took a cautionary step away from Richie, just in case he got any ideas with those dumb, long arms of his.

“Fine,” Richie sniffed, turning up his nose at Eddie with a huff. “Be like that.”

“Okay. I will.” Eddie started striding in the direction Richie had pointed, needing to get moving. He hated feeling still among the chaos around them, looking as though he didn’t belong here even more than he already knew he did.

“Wait up, you don’t even know where you’re going!” Richie appeared next to him, long legs easily out-pacing his stubborn march forward. *Ugh, tall people .*

“And now I have a strictly no-touching guide,” Eddie said with a simpering smile at Richie, whose lips quirked sideways into an awkward half-frown. Eddie could feel the weight of his gaze, even if he was looking pointedly ahead of them. He ignored it until he sensed it shift away from him, letting him breathe again.

“Awww, Bev’s excited to see you!” Richie cooed, reading another text.

Eddie was privately excited to see Bev again, too; he hadn’t seen her since the morning after La Fiesta, when she had woken up on Stan’s couch, given Eddie a casual little peck on the top of the head, and flounced out the front door. He was especially curious to see her in her element, surrounded by the world she had grown up in.

Apparently, “in her element” meant Bev would be in a semi-cramped wardrobe trailer with her converse-clad feet propped up on the back of a chair, laughing wildly with a pair of other women. She turned at the sound of Richie and Eddie opening the trailer door, and grinned at them.

“Come on in, guys,” she said, gesturing with an iced coffee-clutching hand, feet sliding back onto the floor. “Sit wherever.”

So they did. Eddie took the chair Bev’s shoes had been on, and Richie made himself overly comfortable dangling off of a small table that Bev told him to get off of twice.

“So, what’re you up to today?” Bev asked, putting down her coffee and standing to walk over to a rack of clothes that one of the women was rifling through.

“Oh, sightseeing,” Richie said with a breezy wave. “Eddie Spaghetti hasn’t seen nearly enough of the city yet, so I figured he may as well enjoy the perks of holiday-ing with one of the best tour guides in LA.”

“Oh, right, his - fuck, Richie, what’d you call it -?”

“His LA-ducation?”

“Yeah.” Bev snorted, and pulled out a cozy blue sweater on a hanger. “You’re an idiot.”

“You wound me, Miss Marsh!” Richie draped himself over the table, hand pressed to his chest, a doleful look trained on an unsympathetic Bev. “How can you hurt me so, and feel no remorse?!”

“Don’t break the table.” Bev turned to Eddie, smile softening. It seemed she did that a lot when she looked at Eddie: morphed into someone twice as nice, a bit of empathy in her eyes when she glanced from him to Richie and back again. “Do you know what you wanna see while you’re here?”

“I - uh . . .” Eddie frowned. “I honestly don’t know? I wasn’t really thinking about sightseeing when I agreed to live in Stan’s house for a week.”

"No, you were definitely thinking about how nice his bathroom was," Richie agreed, still dangling all four limbs off of the small table. "And the rosebushes."

"The rosebushes?" Bev asked, raising a confused eyebrow at Eddie.

He nodded, feeling a bit self conscious under her gaze. "Yeah. That was sort of how Richie pitched the place to me."

"And that's why you agreed?"

"No, it was mostly because it was eleven states away from the people I wanted to avoid."

She laughed, that bright, strong sound, and Eddie smiled. Any universe where he could get Bev to make that sound had to be a pretty good one, as far as he was concerned.

"I've got some scenes to shoot in, like, twenty minutes," Bev said, as a young guy beckoned her to follow him out of the trailer. "But if you guys want to hang out at the end of the day, at, like, seven-ish? Then I can do that."

"Excellent!" Richie said, jumping up off the table. "Eds and I will be back around seven, and ready for whatever you can throw at us, Marsh!"

Bev just rolled her eyes and gathered up her coffee and a clipboard to follow the assistant out of the trailer. She glanced at Eddie before she ducked outside, though, and levelled him with a knowing look. "If he gets himself arrested on Hollywood Boulevard again, call me, alright?"

Eddie couldn't help the laugh that was startled out of him, but regretted it the longer Bev and Richie just watched him in bemusement. "That was a joke, right?"

Bev just sighed and disappeared through the doorway.

Eddie turned to Richie, who was fidgeting with the rings on his fingers. "She was joking, *right*?"

Richie just shrugged.

“I mean, she . . . well . . .”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake.”

They didn’t go to Hollywood Boulevard, on Eddie’s insistence. Richie protested that it was a crucial part of LA sightseeing, but Eddie didn’t want to tempt fate. If the world could humiliate him in front of Bob Gray as easily as it had, then it could force him to watch Richie Tozier get arrested for god knows what somewhere along the Walk of Fame.

“Alright, so no Boulevard,” Richie relented, sighing. “I guess there’s a few other places.” He scrolled through his phone as they hovered on the sidewalk, trying to hash out a plan of action.

Richie glanced up at him, a smile like sunshine inching across his face. Eddie felt his heart stutter for a moment, and was glad the heat already had him a bit flushed.

“You ever seen *La La Land* , Spaghetti?”

Eddie had seen *La La Land* , because of course he had. Ryan Gosling moodily playing the piano, doing his best to tap dance, and dressed up like a sexy Frank Sinatra? He’d made plans with Mike hardly ten minutes after seeing the trailer. But he managed to contain all of that information and keep his response to a simple “yeah”.

Richie ordered an uber, the two of them slipped inside, and Eddie soon enough found himself unsurprised to see the silhouette of the Griffith Observatory fast approaching.

“Good place to start,” Richie said, offering Eddie a hand to help him out of the car; Eddie declined, and just stared up at the outline of the observatory. “It’s both in a movie, and also genuinely impressive.”

“Yeah? Is that how you’re going to show me LA?”

“Obviously!” Richie looped an arm through Eddie’s pulling him gently down the sidewalk towards the observatory doors. “The best way to experience a city that does nothing but make movies is to see the movie parts. I’m serious, it’s so much cooler.”

“I’m sure,” Eddie said, not bothering to disconnect their arms once they had gotten inside the building and out of the overbearing sun; if Richie wanted to drag him somewhere, he simply would. And Eddie, much to his chagrin, didn’t entirely hate the feeling.

The observatory was beautiful inside, and he was so drawn in by the exhibits that he only stopped to shush Richie’s running commentary three times. They walked through the Wilder Hall of the Eye, watching the evolution of space exploration. The whole room was decorated in photos of the cosmos, glimmering stars everywhere Eddie looked. He turned and saw that the deep blue light that shone around them illuminated Richie’s face like a painting, carving out the planes of his face in dramatic, pale sweeps. Eddie looked away quickly, but kept sneaking small glances that felt like a betrayal of his own dignity.

He paused in front of the Camera Obscura, peering through it to see the whole of Los Angeles spread out before him.

“It’s much prettier at night,” Richie said from right next to him, and Eddie jumped a little bit.

“Is it?”

“Yeah.” Richie leaned over to peek through the lens alongside him; they maneuvered so that they were sharing the view, half of it sprawling out for each of them. “In the day time it looks so . . .”

“Grey?” Eddie suggested, squinting at the distant buildings.

Richie nodded, and Eddie felt the movement through the brush of his unruly curls against the side of his face. “Yeah. Like any old city.”

“Isn’t it, though?” Eddie leaned back; he had already seen LA’s pavement up close enough. Richie leaned back, too, and stared down

at him, lower lip drawn thoughtfully between his teeth.

“I guess so. Doesn’t feel like that sometimes - but I guess that’s what happens when you live in a place for long enough. If I had gone anywhere, I think I could’ve made enough memories to turn it special, you know?”

“Yeah,” Eddie said. “I know what you mean.” There was nothing about Boston that made it organically special to him; it was the nights on his couch with Bill, tossing Georgie into a pile of crunchy autumnal leaves, Ben going over proposals and complaining about deadlines at Oh Joy, Mike’s brownies and marked-up copies of Bill’s novels, the set of penguin magnets at his desk. It was only home because he had made it that way.

Neither of them spoke as they made their way back through the Hall. Richie had purchased them tickets to see one of the planetarium shows when they walked inside, insisting that Eddie couldn’t fly to LA to step inside the *La La Land* observatory but not see the room they danced in.

As they stepped into the Planetarium, which was setting up for their show, Eddie broke their peaceful silence with a small, unbelieving, “Oh.”

They were standing in space. The walls that domed around them were alive with the fire of millions of stars, blinking and burning as though they had done and would continue to do so for all eternity. Distant, colourful blips of planets were scattered throughout this glimmering patchwork, and the gleam of a nearby moon. Eddie found himself craning his neck to stare up, up, up, as though if he looked hard enough into the expansive world that stretched above him he could fall into it, maybe run his fingers through the blue-white tail of a passing comet.

He felt a touch on his arm, and Eddie looked over to see Richie watching him. The smile he wore was small and a little lost, as though Richie was having trouble figuring out what he was smiling about. “You wanna sit?”

Eddie nodded, letting himself be guided to their allotted seats. He

leaned back, staring straight up again, and heard Richie laugh next to him. He wasn't trying to be quiet - naturally - and the sound seemed to echo in the stillness of the room.

"Can't wait to see you when they actually start doing the cool shit."

The Planetarium had swept Eddie away and into a world of starlight and wonder - and Richie had promptly dragged him bodily from the place and into another uber.

He had taken Eddie to a large gray rectangle of a building, and Eddie had frowned as Richie presented it with his usual aplomb. "What am I looking at?"

"The office from *The Office* !" Richie had practically cried, tossing his hands in the air. "I cannot believe you don't recognize -"

"Well, of course I don't, I haven't *seen* the show -" Eddie had begun, which had been the wrong thing to say, because it seemed to be an invitation in Richie's brain.

"We're adding that to the list of things you'll have to do before leaving LA, then, aren't we?" Eddie hadn't had the heart to remind him that he was leaving in less than a week, and instead let himself be coaxed into taking a ridiculous photo in front of the building.

This had led to a trip to Union Station. It was enormous and bustling with activity, especially at rush hour. Eddie and Richie had stumbled their way through the doors, fighting against the flurry of people headed in the opposite direction.

"And why the hell are we at a *train station* now?" Eddie demanded, weaving around a hurrying swarm of business men to press himself against the safety of the wall.

Richie came colliding with the wall right next to him, face alight with childish glee. "It's Union Station, Eds!"

"Yeah, there was a sign outside," Eddie replied, rolling his eyes.

“Care to tell me why that’s important to us right now?”

“Because this is the train station from *The Dark Knight* ?!” Richie’s expressions were changing so quickly that Eddie was having a hard time keeping up: one moment he was grinning like an excited little kid, the next he was staring down at Eddie, absolutely aghast. “*Catch Me If You Can* ? *Blade Runner* ?”

“ . . . Oh, yeah. I guess it is.”

“Incredible,” Richie said, so faintly Eddie almost didn’t catch it over the noise of the station. He was looking around the place, as though he might find an answer to Eddie’s ambivalence lying about somewhere. “He cares not for the modern classics, but the Ryan Gosling tap dance movie? He’s all over it.”

“Shut the fuck up,” Eddie said, elbowing him in the side. Richie just laughed. The sound fluttered in Eddie’s stomach, and he found himself smiling the tiniest of private smiles. “Is there nowhere else in LA that you have to show me?”

Richie lounged back against the wall, phone in hand, flicking quickly through it. He paused, his eyes darting up to Eddie’s for a second, and nodded slowly to himself. “I . . . I think there’s at least one more place we can go today.”

They took yet another uber. This one was a longer ride, and Richie groaned about needing to get his own car.

“Why can’t we just take the bus?” Eddie asked.

Richie just leaned his head back and laughed, loud and long. “Oh you sweet summer child,” he said, patting Eddie’s knee. “You’re so good and innocent of our ways.”

Eddie, rather than focusing on the feeling of Richie’s hand on his leg, shook him off and grumbled, “Ugh, whatever.”

They parked in a small parking lot with a few picnic benches, and Richie ushered Eddie out of the car. The sun overhead was comfortably warm, beginning its descent into the evening horizon, and there was a soft, salty breeze wafting over Eddie's skin. He raised an eyebrow at Richie, who nodded in the direction of the slight incline at the edge of the parking lot.

Walking to the top of the incline revealed a long, sandy beach spread out before them, and the broad cerulean expanse of the ocean beyond it, small white waves lapping at the outcropping rocks. The breeze was stronger there, and Eddie took a long moment to breathe it in, let it sink down into his lungs and chest and limbs.

He wrinkled his nose. "It's briny."

"Well, yeah, it's an LA beach, not a Sandals resort," Richie said with a snort, starting to weave his way through the rocky path down to the beach. Eddie hurried to catch up, still trying to figure out if he liked the smell or not.

"Okay, but still . . . it kind of stinks."

"I doubt Olivia Newton-John would agree with you," Richie said with a wink. He had come to a stop in the middle of the sand, and Eddie stood a few feet beside him.

"Why would I need her opinion -"

"Because this is the Grease beach!" Richie yelled, arms spread wide as though he could present every grain of sand to Eddie. A few tourists nearby looked over curiously, and Eddie ducked his head, embarrassed.

"The what?" Eddie glanced around the beach, as though an answer might be written in the sand. "The greasy beach?"

"You're kidding me, right?" Richie asked, hands on his hips. "It's the beach from *Grease* ! You know, the one Sandy and Danny are on when they sing Summer Lovin' and they fall in love and it's like the first scene of the movie, dude -"

"Oh . . ." Eddie nodded slowly, still looking around them at the

beautiful scene. “Yeah. I know *Grease* .”

“Oh, thank God. We only have so much time to catch you up on all the shit you haven’t seen, Eds.”

And with that, Richie dropped into the sand, stretching out as though trying to make a sand-angel. He quirked an eyebrow up at Eddie, who was just watching him with a frown. “You gonna join me, or . . .?”

“And just sit in the sand? In my clothes?” Eddie hardly wanted to imagine that sensation, itching all along the bare skin of his legs.

“Right-o!” Richie jumped back up and peeled off his outer shirt, placing it pineapple-pattern-side down on the sand, and gesturing to it with both hands. “Take a seat right there, then, old sport!”

“You’re ridiculous,” Eddie said, even as he carefully sank down to sit on Richie’s shirt. The fabric was softer than he’d expected, and he tried not to think too hard about the contact between Richie’s clothes and the bare backs of his own thighs.

Richie collapsed back into the sand next to him, lying back as though he wanted nothing more than to bask in the setting sun and get sand tangled in his hair. He glanced at Eddie out of the corner of his eye, and Eddie gave him a small, grateful smile. For the shirt. Definitely just for the shirt.

Removing his Hawaiian shirt had left Richie in nothing but his shorts and a plain black tank top, that revealed the gentle slope of his collarbones and the birthmarks that dotted his upper arms. He smiled back at Eddie, and Eddie was struck suddenly by how badly he wanted to kiss him. Just once. Just to try it out, see if it felt the way he was suddenly thinking it felt.

He took a deep breath, and then another. He had seen Richie devour a plastic dish of clams earlier outside of a seafood take out place, which felt like a good reason not to kiss him. But Eddie had also let him borrow some of his lip balm (“God, just wipe your fingertip off and then take some off the end - yes, I’m serious!”), so he knew how soft he’d be, how he’d taste, at least a little bit. Eddie couldn’t tell if

Richie would make fun of him for doing it - it seemed like he would because, well, he was Richie. But the look in his eyes that morning, talking about Bev, or in the observatory - he took things seriously when they mattered. When he cared to. But that would depend on Richie taking a kiss from Eddie fucking Kaspbrak seriously, which seemed like far too much to hope for.

Steeling his nerves, ignoring his hammering heartbeat, Eddie leaned over just a fraction of an inch, getting ready to just go for it -

Richie shot up faster than a bolt of lightning, and Eddie had to duck to avoid their skulls cracking together.

“Holy shit! It’s one of those fucking birds!”

Eddie followed Richie’s gaze, trying to catch his breath, and saw a trio of odd-looking, clucking birds on the edge of the shoreline, pecking at the ground. One of them looked up and over at them, as though it had heard Richie.

“What are they?” Eddie asked, sitting back on the shirt.

“These things - I don’t know, Stan told me once but I forgot - and one time I was trying to swim and one of them stole my fucking shorts!”

“How did they . . . Oh. You were -”

“Swimming in the nude, yes, Spaghetti,” Richie said, looking at him over his shoulder with a suggestive waggle of his eyebrows. “Would you like to give that pastime a try tonight?”

Eddie just mimed throwing up, and Richie laughed and lowered himself back onto the sand. “Your loss, Eds.”

Eddie just looked at him for a long moment, trying to decide how much a loss it was. “Shut up.”

Notes for the Chapter:

so next update is here !!! the next one should be up by the end of the week (end of semester papers are out to kill me)

tysm to everyone who's reading, or who's new here
<3 <3

also: i hate peppermint ice cream so i needed to tell people, and also spent twenty minutes on the griffith observatory website figuring out which exhibits were the cutest (and i want to go so badly now wtf)

come hmu @thatsjustfangtastic on tumblr <3 <3

7. walkin' in a winter wonderland

Bill Denbrough's house was as thoroughly decked-out for the holidays as could be expected from a place that housed both Denbrough brothers. Though Bill was willing to concede that his involvement in the process was perfunctory at most; Georgie was the backbone of all their joint festive cheer.

The fact that Georgie hadn't entirely Christmas-ed himself out was something of a miracle that year. He had appeared on Bill's doorstep on the 18th of December, bag at his feet and absorbed with a phone game, bearing a note from their mother asking him to keep an eye on Georgie for the holidays. "Keep an eye on him." Like he was an unruly college student who might throw a party in his parents' empty house, and not a twelve year old being passed off from his parents to his older brother's care like a track baton. Ever since his arrival, Georgie had been on Christmas overdrive: taping garland to every wall in Bill's house, unpacking snowglobes he knew Bill had tucked away in his cold storage room, tossing hot cocoa rations in the shopping cart whenever he and Bill were out and about. He had even wrangled Bill into a tacky Christmas sweater outside of the publishing house's annual ugly holiday sweater party.

Currently, Georgie was in Bill's kitchen trying to bake a box of Pillsbury Christmas cookies patterned with evergreen trees. He had a track record of cooking and managing not to burn down Bill's house, so he had given his brother relatively free reign over the kitchen. He still worked in the living room, where he could see Georgie and the oven through the doorway, but only because Eddie had instilled a degree of paranoia concerning burn wounds in him after an accident with a toasting spear one summer as stupid seventeen year olds.

"Make sure to w- wear oven mitts, yeah?" Bill called, as Georgie peeked into the oven to check on the cookies.

Because Georgie was twelve and hated being told what to do, he just rolled his eyes. "And if I don't?" He asked, jokingly reaching as if to stick his bare hand in the oven.

"Do I have to sh- show you all the photos of third degree burns in

emergency rooms *again* to c- convince you that you don't w- want to do that?" Bill retorted flatly.

Georgie shrunk back from the oven a bit, closing the door and shaking his head. "Nope, you definitely don't have to do that."

"Fantastic." Bill looked back down at the manuscript he had spread open in his lap. It was covered in his tiny, red-ink scribbles, enough arrows connecting different paragraphs to look like a conspiracy and not hours of editing.

His touch on her hand was careful, as though he were afraid to burn her. She moved faster, though, and trailed her palm down the length of his arm, stopping with her hand flat against his chest, right over his racing heart.

Bill should've been writing down ideas for alternative paragraph structures or asking why there were so many commas. Instead, he was imagining Stan's hand, soft and thin-fingered and warm, pressing down on his chest to push him backwards onto Eddie's bed.

He shook his head, as though trying to clear his thoughts. Stan Uris had been creeping steadily into them more and more, sometimes in memory and sometimes in fantasy, sometimes naked, always beautiful. Always naming squirrels after birds.

"They're still hot," Georgie said, appearing suddenly in front of him; Bill jumped. "So be careful." He set a plate of cookies on the dining table Bill was sitting next to.

Instead of going off to play some videogame he had all but stolen from Mike, like Bill expected him to, his brother took a seat on the opposite side of the table. He could see Georgie watching him in his peripheral vision, but he tried to keep his eyes trained on his editing. He was barely comprehending the manuscript anymore, gaze flitting on a loop over the same sentence. The only sound in the house seemed to be the radio, which Georgie had turned to a Christmas station, naturally. Bing Crosby was crooning softly in the corner as the two Denbroughs remained locked in this stand-off.

"So." Georgie broke the silence. He was fidgeting with his phone, like

he wasn't trying to pry, but Bill knew the look in his little brother's eye when he looked up at him. "Stan."

For one terrifying second Bill wondered if Georgie knew what he and Stan had gone upstairs to do after he'd fallen asleep on the couch.

But Georgie relieved him of that horror when he continued, oblivious to Bill's panic, "You like him, right? Like, you wanna date him?"

Bill knew the look on Georgie's face, and didn't like it at all. It was the same look he'd had when Bill had briefly entertained the idea of a relationship with that one guy from accounting last summer. Bill could hardly remember his name at this point; he'd transferred to another location that same autumn. The moment Georgie had caught wind of this, though, he had leapt onto the possibility with a somewhat terrifying vigor.

"Look, dude, I know you w- want me to . . . w- well, I'm not sh- sure, actually." Bill trailed off. "What is it you w- want me to do?"

"Get out more," Georgie said flatly; clearly, he wasn't pulling any punches. "Date somebody. Have some fun."

"Oh, yeah, that," Bill said, rolling his eyes. "Look, I get that you w- want me to be huh- happy, or whuh- whatever, but it doesn't have to be like that. I c- can be happy just, you know . . . hanging out. Like this."

"I don't want you to be like mom and dad," Georgie began, and Bill knew for sure where this was going now.

"I'm not gonna end up like them, dude, I swuh- swear," he argued. "I go on dates! W- with people!"

"Like who?" Georgie asked. Bill frowned; no twelve year old should be able to make him squirm this much with just a disapproving look. "You haven't dated anybody since Penny."

"I - I'm not -" Bill stammered, and shook his head. "I've seen people. Been s- seeing people. W- why are you even w- worried about this, dude? I'm fine."

"You just edit stuff and hang out with me. That's not *fine*, Bill. That's kinda sad." Georgie had his arms folded, chin propped up on them as he stared Bill down from across the table. "Just because mom and dad stick me with you all the time and hate each other doesn't mean that you have to be them to me all the time. You can still do stuff. Besides," he added, as though this was the deciding blow. "I like Stan. He's cool."

"Stan is not c- cool," Bill said, but couldn't keep the fondness out of his voice.

Georgie sat straight up and pointed at him, like he had caught him red-handed. "Ha! You like him!"

"How c- could you possibly know th- that?" Bill demanded, flinching backwards.

"Your face," Georgie said, grinning. "I can just tell."

"I said he w- wasn't cool!"

"Yeah, and you don't like cool! You like Nancy Drew and mecha animes and nerds! And Stan is a nerd! But, like, the cool kind of nerd. He's like non-cool cool."

"That's not a thing. And w- what's not c- cool about Nancy Drew?"

Georgie rolled his eyes. "He named the squirrels, Bill. He's perfect for you."

"Perfect? W- we just met! He's nice and he's c- cute, but - look, Georgie, I don't need to find suh- somebody right now. It's okay if I'm single."

"Sure it is," Georgie said, getting up from the table. He picked up the plate of cookies, holding it carefully to his chest as he backed out of the room. "If you're just gonna stay inside forever, you might as well do it with somebody else who's gonna do it, too." And with that, he vanished upstairs. Bill heard the door of Georgie's sometimes-bedroom close, and knew he wasn't getting any of those cookies.

He's perfect for you. Stan's hands on his waist, his nails on his back,

his mouth slowly making its way down his chest, his eyes bright and clear and brimming with something that makes Bill physically *ache* -

He needed to focus on this manuscript. But he couldn't stop himself from feeling the proximity of Stan, just one house away.

Stan had tried to call Eddie four times.

He was now facing down his phone, which lay on the coffee table, entirely oblivious to the anxious tapping of Stan's foot or the worrying of his lip between his teeth. He had dialed the number and hung up before the second ring four times, and his silent phone now lay taunting him. He couldn't even make a phone call about what he'd done with Bill. What he'd been *doing* with Bill, in the active tense. Plural. Present. Whatever. The grammatical conjugation (mostly) didn't matter, but the fact that it had happened twice in the past forty eight hours. And the fact that Stan was sure it would happen again.

The morning after the First Time, Stan had woken up on Eddie's bed with Bill draped over the edge, as though he'd fallen asleep in the same bed without meaning to. This had made sense, but still sent a pang of disappointment through Stan's chest. He'd shaken this feeling off and gotten up, dressing and brushing his teeth and combing through his tangled curls, watching Bill's chest rise and fall out of the corner of his eye the whole time. When he'd been about to head downstairs to make coffee, he'd given Bill's side a small nudge - then a harder one - and dashed down the stairs when Bill started to stir.

It had been calm over a breakfast of oatmeal and fruit, and piles of brown sugar and maple syrup for Georgie. Bill had been friendly but hadn't touched him anywhere but the shoulder, and Stan had sipped his black coffee and scrolled through the news to avoid eye contact. They were managing pretty well, he thought.

Bill and Georgie had left around eleven, and Stan had all but

collapsed onto Eddie's couch, sighing in relief. The quiet was a welcome companion after the tension of the morning, and Stan had spent the rest of the afternoon and much of the evening reading a book (decidedly not by William King or Elijah Lewis), and eventually flipping through different nature documentary channels. He'd had two glasses of wine all to himself (well, maybe closer to three), and was feeling much more tranquil when he opened the door to find Bill on the other side.

"Georgie's playing with some game Mike lent him," Bill had said, stepping into the house; Stan stepped in rhythm with him, moving to let him enter but not enough to give him space. "He'll be okay for a few hours."

"Hours?" Stan had repeated, and Bill had smiled coyly.

"Hours," he had said again, and touched a hand to Stan's waist.

It had taken him two and a half hours to say he was satisfied with what he'd done with Stan, and Stan had quietly agreed as Bill rebuttoned his shirt and left with a wink and a smile that had felt like a kick to Stan's chest. He couldn't seem to figure out why, though. It was quite the mystery.

Since then, Stan had been flitting about Eddie's house with an odd, fluttering nervousness running through his whole body. He had washed the sheets he'd brought thoroughly, and tidied up the area around the bed just to ease his mind. He had agreed to swap houses with Eddie, and proceeded to hook up with one of his best friends. He had slept with Bill, twice. He should tell Eddie, right? He owed that to him.

But every time he called and thought for even a second about what that conversation would sound like, Stan couldn't help but panic even more. Sleeping with Eddie's best friend was one thing; calling Eddie, while he was still sleeping in his house, and telling him that he had slept with his best friend - well, that was a whole other ballpark.

So there he sat, watching his cell phone like it might give him some sound advice on the matter. It was slowly driving him out of his mind, but he wasn't sure if he didn't deserve that much.

When the phone rang, Stan leapt about two feet in the air.

He snatched it up, scared of the call ending before he had a chance to *say something*, apologize, beg for forgiveness, *anything* -

“Hey, Stan?”

Stan had to bury his face in one of Eddie’s throw pillows for a moment when he heard Bill’s voice from the other end of the line. He emerged a fraction calmer, wincing when he lifted the phone back to his ear and said, “Yeah?”

“I had to head into the office today for a couple meetings, but I was wondering if you wanted to hang out around four? I’ll be free, and you’ve barely seen any of Boston.”

That was true enough; Stan had been content to keep to Eddie’s house and the surrounding neighbourhoods. He’d barely ventured out of the small, Boston-adjacent town Eddie lived in since his trek from the airport. Having the cozy cafe and Bill Denbrough within walking distance hadn’t been much incentive for him to go any further.

But now it was Bill Denbrough asking him to go into the city. With him. To “hang out.”

“. . . Sure.” Stan stood, already heading upstairs to sort through his suitcase to find something that was worthy of such an evening. “Four. I guess you can text me the address?”

“Yeah, for sure,” Bill agreed, and Stan heard the ping of the incoming text message but didn’t pull the phone away from his ear; he felt he could still hear Bill, and didn’t want to miss him saying anything and then sound like an idiot.

“I’ll see you at four, then,” Stan said finally, determined.

“Awesome.” Bill sounded a bit distant over the line, and Stan pinched the bridge of his nose. He was barely involved in this phone call, and here Stan was, stretching it out like too-thin taffy, forcing awkward silence on the pair of them as he invested too much time overthinking it.

“I’ll see you then,” Stan said, trying to ignore the fact that he had already said as much, and hung up before he could think better of it.

Stan was waiting outside of Lyons Publishing House, staring up at the enormous double doors. It was a huge brownstone building on the western end of Downtown Boston, and its name was emblazoned on a broad bronze plaque above the doors. All in all, perhaps more intimidating for a publishing house than Stan had initially thought.

He had hurried to comb through his hair and brush his teeth before pulling on the nearest clean and comfy sweater and jeans he found; he hadn’t wanted to show up looking as though he’d spent the whole day so far lounging in Eddie’s living room, moping and overthinking.

Now that he was there, though, Stan didn’t know what came next. Was he supposed to walk inside, ask to see Bill? Was he meant to wait outside until Bill was finished and came to retrieve him? Why hadn’t he asked Bill any of this, even over text?

Stan frowned, and steeled his nerves. He was a fast-rising, name-taking agent in Hollywood. He had once had a coffee in the heart of Disney headquarters and promptly “negotiated the living shit out of them”, as Richie had recounted, and gotten multiple career-saving contracts out of them for his company’s clients. He had metaphorically spat on the memory of Walt Disney himself and walked out of a meeting with exactly what he came for. He could very well walk into a publishing house and ask to speak to a junior editor.

He stepped inside Lyons Publishing, enjoying the rush of warmth that greeted him, and headed straight for the service desk. A tall, tired man sat behind it, and he eyed Stan like he might give him something to do. “Yeah?”

“I’m here to see Bill Denbrough,” Stan began, but the man cut him off with a smile.

“Oh, Bill? Awesome, I’ll let him know.” He dialed a phone on his desk and, when Bill evidently had picked up, said, “Hey, someone’s here to see you. Tall, serious, very - oh, well, I guess he’s pretty, you know -“

Stan blushes spectacularly. Was this just what it was to be close to Bill? Constant attempts to flatter and embarrass him simultaneously?

“He’s headed down,” the man informed him after he hung up. The look he eyed Stan with now felt a little too knowing for Stan’s comfort. “So, you two are . . .?”

“Sightseeing,” Stan replied shortly, just as the elevator doors slid open to reveal a smiling, sweater-clad Bill. Stan had never seen him in a scarf before - the soft green wool suited his eyes, brought out the auburn tint in his hair.

“Hey!” Bill said, patting Stan on the shoulder. Stan was both annoyed and relieved at the lack of affection in this movement. He wanted to press Bill up against the wall and make him keen, just like the other night. He wanted to sit a respectable, conservative distance from him on a very public park bench, where he could keep his hands to himself. He mostly wanted to go home and sleep until he forgot all about this holiday, and Bill’s eyes, and calling Eddie.

Instead, he let Bill nudge up against him when they walked back out through the doors together, and didn’t think to question it when Bill looped his arm through Stan’s to lead him down the street. Friends did this - even friends who had slept together less than twenty four hours earlier. They could be friends, sightseeing in a big city, casual and inconsequential.

“So, I’m gonna take a w- wild guess and s- say you didn’t come to Boston so you c- could catch a game at Fenw- way Park?” Bill asked as they made their way down the street, slow enough for Stan to consider it ambling.

He rolled his eyes. “What, I don’t seem man enough to like baseball?”

“I - I didn’t m- mean that, like, that isn’t -” Bill’s stammering made

Stan feel a wince of guilt for firing back so harshly.

“I know - I was joking.” He curled his hands deeper into his coat pockets, frowning to himself. It was so strange between them all of a sudden: as if they had forgotten how to be easy with each other, despite the past few days of simplicity. Bill, despite his flirting in the lobby, was swinging back and forth between touching him like he had known him intimately, and touching him like a stranger he’d bumped into on the subway.

“Oh.”

“I was - I mean, I was thinking about seeing the Freedom Trail.” Stan hadn’t actually been thinking about this - he had googled things to do in Boston before leaving LA, and skimmed a list of tourist spots - but he did want to break the uncomfortable silence that had settled over their shoulders like a chilly layer of snow.

“Oh, c- cool. That’s - w- well, part of it isn’t t- too far from here. W- we could head ov- ver?”

“Sure.” And, just for good measure, Stan added, “Lead the way.”

Bill seemed to take this the right way, as he slowly drew closer to Stan’s side as they headed off to start their tour. Stan tried not to focus too much on it, but the feeling of Bill’s elbow occasionally touching his arm had become something captivating to his imagination. God, he was pathetic.

“That sure is . . . a house.”

“It’s a p- pretty old wuh- one, too. Very impressive.”

“A true monument to American history.”

Stan and Bill stood on the sidewalk, mocking the Paul Revere House. Stan was a little nervous to be so critical of a major Bostonian landmark around the passing crowds of locals, but Bill didn’t seem to care, and neither did anyone else. It seemed as though it truly was

just a pretty old house.

“Should we go inside?” Stan asked, beginning to regret his impulsive lie. The Freedom Trail. Really? There were plenty of interesting historic sites in New England, and he had chosen the one that was just a trail of crumbling buildings that had done nothing but house people he didn’t care about.

“There’s an admission f- fee,” Bill said, squinting at the sign on the door.

“Alright, then where to next?” Looking up at the dreary old house, likely full of narrow, rickety hallways and staircases for he and Bill to get wedged together in, he knew he had no interest in going inside.

Bill pulled his phone back out, shifting around the online map of the Freedom Trail he’d pulled up. Unfortunately, they’d managed to miss the last tour of the day, and had been stuck awkwardly guiding themselves from site to site. They’d made it to four so far, and Stan was feeling more embarrassed by the minute. Was this what Bill thought he was interested in? Did he think Stan was enjoying Old Church Number Three? And why the hell did that even *matter* to Stan? He’d had sex with Bill, not proposed to him. In less than a week, they would part ways forever, and he’d be sitting in the California sunshine wondering why he’d flown across the country to stand in the snow feeling uncomfortable.

“This w- way,” Bill said, pointing a gloved hand down the street. “The next wuh- one isn’t too far - it’s another ch- church.”

“Spectacular,” Stan said.

The next site, however, was not just a church - it was primarily a graveyard.

“Oh.” This felt odd. Stan couldn’t stop just staring at the rows of headstones, a small statue of an angel off to one side, arms reaching to the overcast heavens. Snow, which had begun falling half an hour into their trek, was gathering in a soft blanket over the dozens of names that lived there.

“D- do you . . . I mean, w- we don’t have t- to go in.” Bill turned to look at him, shrugging. “I never underst- stood w- why they put stuff like this in tourist att- tractions. F- feels w- weird.”

“Yeah, it does.” Stan was glad he wasn’t alone in that thought, which was odd; he’d been to grave-like sites before, wandered the halls of museums that held old funeral steles and sarcophagi. But there was something about knowing how close he was to the dust of those people, right under his feet, that made him a bit apprehensive.

He frowned. Very classy, Uris, lead your unsuspecting non-date who you definitely still want to hook up with again (and again and again) to a graveyard at night.

“You know w- what,” Bill began, as Stan’s hands came to rest on the wrought iron gate of the small cemetery. The metal was cold, even through his gloves.

“Hm?” Stan hummed, glancing back at him. Bill’s eyes were trained on him, steady and certain, as the fluttering snowflakes tangled themselves in his hair, a reddish mess from being tousled by the wind.

“I know somew- where nearby th- that’s nice. W- we could just . . . go there?” He asked it as though he didn’t think Stan was certain. As though, with the way Bill looked at him, Stan wouldn’t follow him right off the docks and into the Atlantic.

“Sure,” Stan said, releasing his grip on the fence, letting his hands curl defensively back into his coat pockets. “Let’s go.”

Bill’s “somewhere nearby” turned out to be a diner, part of some east coast chain that Stan had never seen in person before. The place was fairly quiet when they stepped inside, and the heat that fogged up the windows was a welcome reprieve as they sat across from each other at a small corner table.

“Do yuh- you - is this okay? Is it, like, k- kosher?” Bill asked, awkwardly nudging his menu around; he clearly knew what he’d order already.

Stan opened his menu, and bit his lip to try and keep his expression neutral; his whole body seemed to be tingling because of Bill's remembering this small detail about him. *He remembered your dietary restriction* , Stan thought to himself as he stared, eyes glazed, at the list of all-day breakfasts. *He didn't recite Keats to you* .

But - and this was a foolish, beautiful little hope in his chest - maybe one day he might.

"Yeah, it's fine," he assured him, chewing over the soups. "Thanks for asking, though."

"No p- problem." Stan wondered if he imagined the embarrassed duck of Bill's head. "So, um, th- thoughts on the suh- sightseeing s- so far?"

"Boston is definitely . . . old. So, I guess it has that going for it."

Bill snorted. "W- we really did j- just traipse around to different old huh- houses and graveyards, didn't w- we?"

Stan folded his menu closed, straightening it on the table in front of him, as his eyebrows lifted in disbelief. "Yes, we did - and, uh, *traipse* ?"

"You know," Bill said with a dismissive hand wave. "W- walk around. Amble. Muh -made our w- way."

"I guess that is the definition," Stan agreed, face still twisted into an odd half-smile, half-frown. He couldn't tell if he was delighted or infuriated. "But *traipse* ?"

"It's just - the ruh- writer I'm w- working with r- right now uses it a lot, and s- so does Elijah, so it kind of . . . I don't know, it just - s- stuff gets into my vocabulary, and - are you laughing at me?" He demanded, incredulous, as Stan pressed his palm tighter against his mouth, trying and failing to hide his grin.

"I - well - yeah, pretty much," Stan said, dropping his hand, shaking gently with laughter. "I just . . . *traipse* ?"

"Shut up," Bill muttered, sipping his water, glaring at Stan. "You're p-

pretentious, Mr. Nature Documentary.”

“How are nature documentaries pretentious?” Stan demanded. “There’s nothing pretentious about knowing more information on - on elephants, or emus, what’s wrong with that?”

“W- wait, so it’s *not* so that you can p- pull out facts in small talk to sound s- smart? Then I’ve been going about w- watching these all ruh- wrong,” Bill said, brow furrowed dramatically. “So, this whole time, you’ve just been dying to know about the mating r- rituals of squids, or -?”

“Hi there! I’m Marie, I’ll be your server tonight; can I get you any drinks?” The waitress who had appeared out of nowhere next to their table was looking down at them with a strained smile, and something in her eyes told Stan she had heard a not-insignificant amount of their mini-feud.

“Just water, thanks,” he said, trying not to laugh at Bill’s flushed cheeks. “But I’ll have the french onion soup with salad, thank you.”

Bill ordered his burger through a storm of stutters, and thanked her maybe too profusely when she left them be. Stan snorted as Bill propped his head on his hand, staring despondently ahead. “That w- was awful.”

“Just so you know, we don’t know how squids mate,” Stan said, just to be an asshole. “And I wouldn’t want to know if we did.”

“W- whatever,” Bill said, rolling his eyes, but he didn’t look annoyed. “Squid-hater.”

“Absolutely,” Stan agreed. “Have you seen them? For the sake of humanity, they shouldn’t exist.”

“They’re not b- bothering anybody!” Bill protested. “They’re just swimming around in the deep ocean!”

“They’re bothering *me* because I have to know that they’re out there at all,” Stan argued, pulling his phone out of his pocket. “Do you wanna see some images of squids? Because I think maybe you’ve forgotten what they physically look like.”

"You r- really don't have to show me this, I know w- what a squid looks like . . ." Bill trailed off, lip curling in disgust at the photo Stan held out to him on his phone screen. "Oh, God. Are they r- really *this* bad? This isn't an exc- ceptionally ugly one?"

"I'm afraid not." Stan tucked his phone away. This? This was good. The tension between them had been hacked to shreds by some sarcasm and squid photos, and now they were settled across from each other as comfortable as ever. It seemed even solving emotional issues with Bill wasn't as difficult as Stan feared they would be.

Their food arrived, and he sipped on his soup as he watched Bill devour his burger. "You okay?"

Bill looked up, mouth full, and raised his eyebrows in question. Stan sighed through his nose and kept going. "Are you trying to make death easier for the cow by getting through it as quickly as possible?"

Bill snorted - which seemed like a dangerous action when his mouth was full of beef and pickles - and eventually swallowed his food. "Just busy t- today, didn't get lunch. I also r- realized that there's something I'd like to sh- show you, and I -" Bill paused, eyes darting away from and back to Stan's, nervous. "I got kind of c- carried away. I r- really w- want you to see this."

Stan smiled, chest fluttering like the snow outside. "Well, just don't choke on my account - then you won't be able to show me anything."

"Roger that," Bill said with a nod, and returned to devouring his dinner with a vengeance.

"So, what's this mysterious wonderful thing you want to show me?" Stan asked as they left the diner, Bill holding the door open for him. The snow was still drifting down, but it had slowed to something like a gentle dusting of confectioner's sugar. They moved down the street, Bill slightly ahead of Stan, though he kept glancing back at him as they walked, like he wanted to make sure he was still there.

"It's something cool, I sw- wear," Bill said, and grinned. "But how c- can it stay mysterious if I tell you w- what it is?"

“By letting me know, so that later I can pretend to be surprised,” Stan said. “I’m not a big surprises person.”

“Noted,” Bill said. As though he would, indeed, note this for future reference. As though Stan’s gift preferences were at all relevant to him in the long-term. Stan couldn’t help but wonder how comfortable he had let Bill become with ideas of them spanning longer than a week, and felt a pang of guilt. Maybe he really didn’t feel enough; that would explain how he could accidentally string Bill along like this.

“Okay, s- so, it’s just up ahead, and it’s - it’s m- mostly just -“

“You know what,” Stan cut in, voice flat and stilted. He felt a bit sick. “Fuck it. Surprise me, Denbrough.”

Bill looked back at him again, right then, and the streetlights played a dance across the planes of his face as he turned; he was all shadow and light, and Stan couldn’t seem to see his eyes. “Alr- right then - if you’re sh- sure.”

The cold had begun to bite, and numbed Stan’s fingertips as they continued their walk, deeper and deeper into the city. He fisted them protectively in his pockets, in his gloves, unsure how so many layers couldn’t be guarding them from all the chill in the air. Bill walked just ahead of him, still, but there was a distance to it now. They moved silently through the streets.

Stan was hardly paying attention when they reached the lobby of a very tall building, and Bill stuck his arm straight out at Stan, still standing just ahead. It was a split second before Stan realized that he wanted him to take his hand, and he did so, reluctant to pull his out of its pocket cocoon.

Bill’s hands were bare, and Stan could feel it through the fabric of his glove; he was so warm.

They walked through the lobby, Bill stopping by a desk with an attendant to “get two tickets up, please.” Stan’s nose crinkled in

distaste - he really wasn't fond of surprises. But, God, knowing where in his hometown Bill so adamantly wanted him to see, to take him there personally, was too much for Stan at the moment.

They rode the elevator in silence, looking straight ahead at the doors. But, though he had released it to buy their tickets, Bill was holding Stan's hand again.

The doors slid open to reveal a long bank of floor-to-ceiling windows. The hallway they stepped into was dim. Bill, hand still wrapped up in Stan's, led him step by step to the windows. He stood to the side, hands now firmly back in his own pockets, while Stan stared helplessly down out of the windows. Stan could feel Bill's eyes on him, but tried not to pay attention to that weight as he peered down into the yawning, glittering void of Boston at Christmastime.

"I huh- hope you're not af- fraid of heights," Bill said suddenly; so suddenly, in fact, that Stan nearly flinched in surprise. "I didn't - but then you said 's- surprise me', so - here's the s- surprise."

"It's . . ." Stan's mouth stopped, though his brain was running a mile a minute. It was beautiful. It was magical. It was one of the three good surprises Stan had ever had in his life. It was -

"You." He said this in a small breath, like Bill was a quiet, relieved exhale. "It's very *you* ."

"I c- can't tell if that's good or bad," Bill joked, and shifted a little closer to Stan, so they were standing shoulder to shoulder. Stan just kept looking out the window, down at the billion tiny lights that flickered in the blankets of snow Boston had nestled its way into. He thought he could spot Christmas trees, whose lights were more colourful, and he ignored the part of his brain that said that wasn't possible for him to pick up on. He picked up on it, he thought. He thought, if he looked for it, that he could even see their Hanukkah Tree all the way in Belmont.

"Definitely good," Stan conceded, and turned to look at Bill. He was lit up by the dim glow of the city below, drifting panes of light over the curves of his face. Stan sighed. "Definitely good. Thank you."

"It's no problem," Bill said with a shrug, looking pleased. "I just come up here on off hours to hang out and think, y- you know?"

"About what?" Stan asked, because apparently he couldn't be done with ridiculously personal questions with Bill ever.

"You know," Bill said, glancing away. "S- stuff. Things."

Stan raised an eyebrow. "Stuff and things?"

"Yes."

He pursed his lips, and leaned contemplatively against the window, looking at the city sideways; it was still beautiful. "How about - what if I say one thing that I would think about up here, and you say one thing you would think about up here, and then we've both thought about it?"

Bill cocked his head to the side to look at him, now leaning his back against the glass. "Alright then. W- what would you come here to think about?" Stan could hear the real question in his voice: what did you come to Boston to absolutely *not* think about?

He touched his forehead to the window, which was cool and oddly helpful in clearing his head. "I would probably think about the guy that broke up with me - very dramatically, I might add - before I left LA."

"R- really?" Bill gave him a soft half-smile. "You out b- breaking hearts on the w- west coast, too, Uris?"

Stan frowned; he hadn't realized he was breaking hearts on the east coast at all. "I hope not. He just - we didn't click. We weren't working. He -" Stan faltered, the words dying halfway up his throat. They felt hot and stormy, sending a mortified flush up his neck. He swallowed it down, focusing his gaze on the lights shimmering indifferently below him. *It's like you don't feel anything at all.* "He wanted things I couldn't give him. The usual."

"Like w- what?" Bill asked, and the disbelief in his voice surprised Stan. "What could he possibly w- want that you, Stan fucking Uris, couldn't give him? Since I m- met you, you've p- performed multiple

actual Christmas miracles. He m- must be an asshole.”

“He did empty my closet onto my front lawn when he left,” Stan said in a small voice. The way Bill had said *Stan fucking Uris* was ringing in his ears.

“Oh, th- then he was definitely an asshole.”

“Yeah, probably,” Stan said with a grimace. “But I mean, have you met me?”

“I have, actually,” Bill said. “And you’re p- pretty f- fucking great.”

Stan had to look at him then, had to know what his face looked like in that exact moment, just so he could remember it later. He wanted to remember it later, maybe that night when he was falling asleep, or the next time Bill was hovering over him on a bed, or when he was thousands of feet in the air, leaving Boston behind. And so he looked at Bill, who was looking right back at him as though he hadn’t looked away since they reached the window, and whose face was set in distinct, determined lines: the line of his nose, the furrowed line of his brow, the lines crinkling out from around his narrowed eyes. He looked ready to argue, as if he thought he’d have to convince Stan that he was pretty fucking great - as if he wanted to convince him.

“You - you’re also - I mean . . . yeah. You know.” Stan swallowed against the anxiety rising in him, and tapped out a quick, even rhythm on the glass of the window, chilled beneath his fingertips. “You’re pretty fucking great yourself.”

“Th- thanks,” Bill said, a smile playing around the corners of his mouth. “I’m glad you th- think so.” He snorted, rolling his eyes. “But Georgie p- pretty explicitly said that I’m not cool last night, and that y- you definitely are, so I think that might be the f- final verdict on that.”

“You are cool though,” Stan argued, breathing out a nervous laugh. “Especially how you are with your brother. It’s absolutely cool of you to take care of him the way you do.”

“Yeah.” Bill laughed once, an odd, off-kilter laugh that Stan hadn’t

heard him make before. He turned to face the window, away from Stan's curious gaze. "I guess you w- wanna know my th- Thing, right?"

"It's okay - you don't have to, it was only a joke -" Stan started, shaking his head profusely; the last thing he wanted was for Bill to get uncomfortable, and for the tension to settle right back over them. They'd broken it easily, but he didn't want to have to.

"No, it's okay, I agreed," Bill said with a wave of his hand. "B- besides, it's only f- fair - you told me yours." Stan appreciated the careful way that Bill avoided calling it his *baggage* or something similar, because it didn't feel like sharing baggage.

"I guess I c- come up here to think about my ruh- writing a lot, so that's usually what it is. But s- sometimes I think about . . . I don't know, sh- shitty stuff. My p- parents, mostly."

Stan was about to say that he didn't have to share anything too personal - peeking this deeply into Bill's life felt wrong, knowing that he would be vanishing so soon from it - but Bill kept going, that determination drifting back into his face. Stan stayed quiet, listening.

"They just . . . I don't know. S- stuff has been w- weird between th- them for a really long time. Georgie got r- really sick when he was little - just for a little w- while, barely a couple of months, I think it was nuh- pneumonia or something - but it was r- really bad. Like, people thought he w- would die, kind of bad. And he got better - it's been years, r- really, he was so young he hardly remembers it - but it s- scared my dad, really badly. And he and my mum never . . . I guess they never got over it. It sort of broke th- them, the idea that wuh- one of us could get h- hurt or sick like that and just - I don't know, j- just *die* . And it w- was like my mum r- realized that me and Georgie w- were the only r- reason she was home, or something, and so sh- she stopped being home a lot and f- focused w- way more on her w- work, and my dad awkw- wardly sort of walked aw- way without ever actually w- walking away. Like, he never divorced her, but over the years it s- sort of became obvious th- that he didn't treat her like his w- wife. She was just s- someone he lived w- with. They didn't like each other anymore . . . I just w- wish they'd gotten a divorce, like normal p- people." He laughed, that strange laugh again, and

Stan felt his chest ache. "They just s- stayed together, w- without really being together. And Georgie s- sort of just became my r- responsibility. It w- was easier, and better for him, and I w- was old enough to do it, so I just sort of p- picked up their slack."

"I . . ." Stan breathed, uncertain. This wasn't entirely unfamiliar territory - he was friends with Bev and Richie, after all - but talking with someone he both hardly knew and also knew so intimately . . . it felt intrusive. What did his thoughts or sympathy matter?

"It's c- cool, it's kind of a lot," Bill said quickly, looking over at him. He was smiling, and there was something a bit lopsided in the smile that sent another pang of longing through Stan. "And, like, it's not the w- worst. Hanging out with Georgie is great, and I love h- him, and I'd rather hang out w- with him constantly than let him sit around w- while my parents do w- whatever it is they do now - but I just f- feel bad for him. He didn't get much of my p- parents during their golden years or w- whatever, he just got th- this." He shrugged. "But, you know, they don't live far - Maine, it's w- where I'm from - so he comes down a lot. And he loves th- the guys, and - it's s- still great. There's just . . ."

"There's something he didn't get, that he deserved to have," Stan said, thinking about the exuberant, Christmas-loving tween in Eddie's living room, sweeping up glitter and pelting his brother with mini marshmallows. He tried to picture him with the two people Bill had painted in his mind, but couldn't make the connection.

"Yeah, exactly. It's just - f- frustrating."

"They kind of sound like assholes, too," Stan said. "A little bit."

"This r- really is the kind of view to h- help put assholes in perspective, isn't it?" Bill laughed. "Makes them seem so tiny."

"Very ignorable," Stan agreed, wearing his own small smile.

Bill reached over then, and took Stan's hand; he was able to simply reach out and take it because Stan let him, couldn't help but let him. Neither of them were wearing gloves, and Bill's hand was so warm and firm in his that Stan just let himself enjoy it, fast-approaching

departure be damned. If this was going to be an inconsequential holiday fling with one of the most amazing people Stan had ever met, then he was going to have a good time while it lasted.

They went home on the same train, and Bill dozed slightly in the seat next to Stan's; Stan tried not to notice how close Bill was to resting his head on his shoulder. The snow had stopped when they got off at the station, and Bill made a show of leaving patterns in the fresh layer wherever they walked, drawing out snowmen and hearts and a smiley face. He dragged his boot through the snow and turned it into a winky face, then looked up and winked at Stan, and Stan rolled his eyes and ignored the swooping of his stomach.

Bill had to check on Georgie, which he did, and Stan had just gotten into his pyjamas and started a new podcast when Bill turned up on Eddie's front doorstep in just sweats and a t shirt.

"Georgie's passed out," he said, grinning, and Stan nodded once to let him inside. "So, I w- was thinking maybe . . ." Bill walked Stan backwards to the wall, mouth hovering over his throat.

"Yes," Stan said without even thinking. "Whatever it is, go for it."

He felt Bill's grin against his pulse point. "Alright then."

Notes for the Chapter:

hi everybody !! i return !! this chapter was originally meant to be longer, but this felt like a more natural conclusion to it (the extra stuff will be present in the next chapter, and will feature mike and ben !! the lads are headed your way and i love them !!!!) i hope this chapter was okay, i'm not 100% confident in it, especially the dialogue, but this also feels like as satisfied as i'll get with it lmao

tysm for everyone who has commented or subscribed or left kudos, you guys are so so sweet and i'm so glad you're liking the story <3 <3

i'll be back soon with the next chapter, i'm just also writing two papers for class rn lmao so there might be a slight lag

hmu on tumblr @thatsjustfangtastic if you wanna chat or yell or chell (chat-yell) <3

8. the moon is right (the spirit's up)

“You’re such an Angela.”

“I don’t even like cats!”

“The fact that that’s your argument means you’re an Angela,” Richie said, pointing his spoon at Eddie, who glared even harder. “Face it, Eds, it’s your destiny.”

“And you’re Michael,” Eddie shot back, arms crossed tightly over his chest as he sank back into Stan’s plush couch cushions.

“I am *honoured* , Edward,” Richie declared, hand clapping over his heart. “I will wear this compliment as a token of pride until the day that I die!”

“Well, that might not be that much longer from now,” Bev said with a snort from where she was curled up on the carpet. She had one leg stretched out in front of her, and was painting her toenails in bright red glitter polish. “If Eddie kills you, by the way, what song did you want played at your funeral again? I always forget.”

“You don’t forget, honey bunch, I change it.” Richie reached out to ruffle her hair, and she waved him off with a laugh. “I think right now I’d like Vindicated, Dashboard Confessional.”

“You want the Spider-Man song?” Eddie asked, one eyebrow raised in question. He had barely glanced away from the episode of *The Office* that they were watching, but he’d looked long enough to get a glimpse of Richie’s hands buried under the fabric of his oversized sweater, bare legs crossed under him on the couch. Eddie fought down a blush, something that took an extraordinary amount of spite.

“It’s a classic!” Richie defended, waving his spoon around. Thankfully there wasn’t any mint chip ice cream on it this time - Eddie thought he was making sure before gesturing now, after he’d splattered some across Eddie’s favourite pyjama shirt earlier. “Just because you don’t have the capacity to appreciate one of the greatest works of our generation -”

"I've seen Spider-Man, you dick," Eddie said, rolling his eyes. "I told you I've seen it. Just because I didn't understand *one* reference you made to the most *obscure* part of the movie, doesn't mean I've never *seen* it -"

"Okay, so you've sat down and watched it," Richie interrupted him. "But have you ever actually *seen* it? Because there's a difference."

"What does that even *mean*?" Eddie demanded, shoving Richie's shoulder.

"I mean, did you ever truly *experience* Sam Reimi's Spider-Man, or did you just look at it for two hours? They aren't the same thing, Spaghetti."

"Don't call me that, and also fuck you."

"Oh, very nice, very mature comeback there, you really got me!" Richie gave a dramatic eye roll, and Eddie would have thought he'd really been annoyed if he couldn't see the smile tugging at the left corner of his mouth. He always smiled like that when Eddie said something stupid: starting from the left, and then curling across the rest of his face, like a curtain being drawn to the side.

"Would you two shut up for, like, a second?" Bev asked; she'd finished her nail polish, and her toes wiggled and shimmered brightly against the soft cream of Stan's carpet. "I happen to fucking like this episode, and I wanna see Kevin sing Alanis Morissette."

"Oh shit, I forgot that was in this one," Richie said, excited gleam in his eye.

Eddie frowned, and nudged Bev with his foot. "He sings along, doesn't he?"

"You bet he does."

"Christ."

They had been speeding through episodes of *The Office* all day, and Eddie had been subjected to the full scope of Richie's impressions of various characters. To Eddie's surprise, his best one had been Jim - at

least, the character he knew the most lines from was Jim. His Dwight impression consisted almost exclusively of “bears, beets, Battlestar Galactica”, which he had repeated until Eddie had threatened to take away his ice cream. Watching him act out Jim’s confession to Pam word for word had been probably the most unnerving of them all, and Eddie had swatted his face until he went quiet, claiming he wanted to hear John Kransinski say it, not Richie. Around noon, Richie had insisted on skipping ahead to the Christmas episodes. He had also argued that the presence of his mint chip ice cream was to contribute to the holiday spirit, but Eddie was pretty sure that that was bullshit, as he hadn’t let anybody else near the stash.

“So, I’m meant to go out with some people tonight,” Bev said, leaning back on the couch cushion to peer at Eddie upside down. “And I thought you guys would want to come with? It’ll be fun, and everyone’s from set, they’re all really chill.”

Eddie squeaked out a, “Really? Tonight?” at the same time that Richie groaned, “Where?”

Bev rolled her eyes to glare at Richie, though there was no real heat to the gesture. “It’s gonna be in Santa Monica - someone’s throwing a party on the beach somewhere. We’re probably gonna pregame at a bar close to there, and head over for, like, eleven?” She looked back at Eddie, raising her eyebrows expectantly. “You wanna come, Eddie?”

“I, uh -” Eddie paused, uncertain.

“You know what,” Richie declared, voice booming behind Eddie. “Fuck it. I’ll go. You talked me into it, Marsh.”

“Shut the fuck up, you’re barely invited.” Bev flicked Richie’s knee; he launched himself backwards over the arm of the couch, arm thrown over his face in mock agony. Bev just cackled. “Eddie, you don’t have to go, but it’d be cool if you did. It’d be fun for you to see LA with someone other than that loser as a guide.”

“Hey!” Richie cried defensively. “Eds and I had a great fuckin’ time the other night, and you’re just mad because I’m still a better tour guide than you!”

“He absolutely isn’t,” Bev said to Eddie, not even looking at Richie.

“Oh, c’mon, I’m pretty good,” Richie insisted, slinging an arm around Eddie’s shoulders. “Tell Beverly that I’m not the worst, angel. *Please* .” Eddie turned his face away from Richie’s, and shoved the warm weight of his arm off of himself. He almost missed it when it left, which he scowled at. *Get your shit together, Kaspbrak.*

“You’re 18% not the worst. Happy?”

“Not in the slightest,” Richie said, beaming. “But whatever you say, Eds.”

“My name is Eddie,” Eddie replied, knowing it meant nothing. He turned back to Bev, and nodded once, determined. “And I’m in. I’ll go.”

“Yes!” Richie pumped his fist in the air, leaping up from the couch enough to upset his carton of ice cream. He scrambled to pick it up, and sighed at the glob that was melting on the floor. “You know what would make this so much easier?”

“We’re not getting Stan a surprise dog so that it can eat all your messes,” Bev said; it sounded as though she’d had to put her foot down on this before.

“But he gets lonely, so it’d be a win-win!”

“No surprise dogs! Let me watch my episode!”

Bev had elected to help Eddie get ready, which made him feel much better than when Richie started to strut into Stan’s bedroom, giving Eddie an over-exaggerated wink before falling across the bed. It had taken ten minutes for Eddie to properly shoo him from the room.

So, yes, it felt much safer in there with Bev, who had painted his fingernails while they finished watching the Office. She had looked at

his feet, as though to silently ask for permission to paint his toenails as well, and they both cringed at the same time; there would be no feet-touching in Stan's house that day. But now his fingernails sparkled with festive, vibrant red glitter polish, and Eddie was moving them to see how they looked in the light.

"I know, it's one of my favourites," Bev said, tossing him a half-smile as she spread a bundle of his clothes out on the bedspread. Taking a step back to survey their options, she frowned, hand braced on her hip, mouth scrunched to the side, deep in thought. Then she glanced at Eddie, still frowning slightly, and asked, "How do you dress like this when you're *that* gay?"

Eddie spluttered for a solid twenty seconds before responding. "Okay, first, that is *such* a stereotype. And second, you have no idea that I'm gay!"

"You only watched *La La Land* because Ryan Gosling was in it," Bev said flatly, eyebrow cocked in challenge. "And your preferred club banger was a Carly Rae Jepsen song. This wasn't hard to piece together."

"Oh fuck off, *Emotion* is a bop and you know it," Eddie shot back as he hopped up to sit on the bed. "And how do you know about the Ryan Gosling thing?"

"Richie told me," Bev said as she held up a sky blue polo shirt. "And, dude, really? Is this *all* you brought?"

"Work clothes," Eddie said dismissively, "But Richie told you that?"

"Yeah." Bev tossed down the polo shirt and rifled through the assortment of clothes, emerging with a burgundy button-down. "He talks about you, you know." The way she said that, with a knowing smirk at Eddie as she held the shirt up to him, made it sound like a careful understatement. "This is nice, actually - festive. It's a nice colour on you."

"Thanks," Eddie said, squinting up at her in confusion. "Richie *talks* about me? To you?"

"Only good things, my dude," Bev promised, sweeping the button-down away with a flourish and moving back to go through the rest of his things. "I'm worried about this being too warm for the beach, though . . . Hmm. You really only brought work clothes, huh?" She held up a pair of plain grey slacks with a bemused smile.

Eddie shrugged. "It was kind of last minute. I also -" he paused, glancing away from her, "I don't really . . . you know. Get out too much. Like, back home."

"No? Huh," Bev tossed the slacks down and turned to open Stan's closet. "I never would've guessed. You handle your tequila pretty well for someone who doesn't get out much." She winked.

Eddie flushed at the memory of the other night, stumbling out of La Fiesta with the two of them, balmy night air hugging him as he danced along the pavement. "Thanks. And are you sure we should be going through there?"

Bev looked up from where she was piling Stan's things onto one arm, the other digging through his closet. She shrugged, unconcerned. "He never minds. Stan can share clothes, as long as you leave them just as you found them. Besides, you guys have, like, compatible complexions, sort of." She held a delicate lilac shirt up to Eddie, squinting at him. "You both look good in purple at least."

"Oh," was all Eddie could think to say as Bev extricated the only pair of jeans Eddie had brought, and nodded in satisfaction as she assessed them.

"Thank God you're civilized enough to have skinny jeans on hand," she said. "Try them on with the purple shirt."

Eddie complied, and Bev turned around to grant him some privacy. She had turned around and was examining this outfit on him when she continued.

"So what do you do, back home?"

"I work at the Boston Globe," Eddie said, a hint of pride in his voice.

"Oh, nice!" Bev's index finger tapped on her cheek as she peered at

him. "Maybe tuck the shirt in, but let it sort of billow out a bit? Like, give it a bit of slack. What d'you write?"

"Oh, I . . ." Eddie hesitated. That tended to happen when he thought too much about what his work actually was, the monotony and embarrassment and discomfort of working under Myra Wilson's thumb. Just the thought of her simpering smile popped the beautiful bubble of Eddie's lovely New England daydream life: his friends crowded onto his couch, Earl Grey tea with Bill when pouring over his final drafts, Mike's brownies, laughing with Ben in the break room, all fell away when Myra entered the picture.

"Eddie?" His eyes met Bev's; she was watching him with a worried crease in her brow, green eyes questioning. "You all good?"

"I . . ." Eddie forced a breath into his lungs, then another one. He didn't want to panic, didn't want the fear that Myra brought with her to invade this wonderful escape he had found. Things had been exciting and unpredictable with Richie and Bev, but they had also been freeing. Eddie had spent the past several days pretending that Myra Wilson had never dug her claws into him and his career, thinking he could escape her. Maybe he'd been an idiot to think so.

"Eddie?" Bev said again, though she sounded a bit far away. Eddie felt her grip on his shoulders, and then she was guiding him over to Stan's bed, and gently perching him on the edge of it. "Just try to breathe, you're alright, it's all good . . ."

"Yeah," he said, a bit breathless. The sudden tightness in his chest was fading, which was nice; at least he hadn't had a full on panic attack in front of her. "I'm good. Sorry about that."

"No, don't worry, just . . . is work that stressful right now?"

Despite the seriousness of Bev's tone, Eddie couldn't help the laugh that startled its way out of him. "You could say that. My boss . . . Christ." And suddenly Myra, the incident with Bob Gray, the dread and anxiety he felt every time she entered the room, were spilling out of Eddie.

Bev nodded along; it didn't take long to explain. When he finished he

just focused on breathing; he didn't think anyone outside his friends knew about the full extent of Myra's influence on him. Then again, he was quickly starting to think of Bev as one of them - kept wondering if she would like Ben's dog, or thinking about how badly she could beat Bill at Mario Kart. Something about her felt *right*, enough so that his brain seemed to have filed her along with *people to trust implicitly*.

Richie was starting to enter a similar category, though Eddie had been trying not to think too much about that particular development.

"That . . . God, that fucking *sucks*, dude." Bev ran a hand through her hair, ruffling it wildly. "I'm sorry you've had to deal with that. She sounds like an asshole."

"Yeah, she kind of is," Eddie said. This was comfortable, familiar: hanging out in a cozy space, complaining about Myra. He let out an awkward, sharp laugh, and twisted his fingers together. "I don't . . . I don't know what I'm going to do when I go back. She could crush me with her fucking pinkie if she wanted to, because who the fuck am I, right? *God*," he swore, looking back up at Bev, "she is such a *megabitch*."

"That's one way to put it," Bev said with a snort. "But you - I don't know, Eddie, you're smart. You deserve better than that. Maybe . . ." she trailed off, cheek cupped in her palm as she gazed at him. "Maybe you should think about getting away from her permanently. There's got to be somewhere else you can go, find a job, do what you're good at. Even another department?"

"I couldn't ask for a transfer - she'd be furious." Even as Eddie said it, he knew he wanted to. He'd thought about it for years: packing up his meager desk, marching out from under Myra's shadow and into the light of someone like Dan, who wouldn't mock or belittle or trap him.

"Maybe it's okay if she's furious," Bev said softly. "Maybe she deserves to lose someone as good as you."

Eddie bit his lip. "Yeah?"

“Yeah, sure,” Bev said airily, getting to her feet. “That’s why I left acting.”

“I - I didn’t want to ask, or anything, it’s okay, I’m not -” Eddie stammered, uncertain at Bev’s light tone and growing smirk.

“I wouldn’t be explaining anything to you if I didn’t want to,” she reminded him. “Besides, who cares? You gonna write an article on me?”

“No!” Eddie winced at his own desperation to reassure her.

“Good. I expect to never see one.” Bev whirled around, pulling a makeup bag out of her backpack. She’d gone next door to her house to spirit supplies over earlier, and the layered fabric of her mini dress fluttered wildly around her thighs when she moved. She perused Eddie’s face for a moment before pulling out primer and a small eyeshadow palette. “I promise this is a good idea, by the way, you’re gonna be so fuckin’ cute when I’m done with you.”

“I trust you,” Eddie said, though it didn’t sound much like a joke.

Bev nodded and coaxed him into closing his eyes so she could dab primer onto his face. She spoke while she worked, Eddie trying to picture her expressions from her voice.

“My dad was like that. But, I mean, maybe worse. Worse because he could come home with me at the end of the day.” She let out a breath that was less sigh and more furious huff. “At least forty five percent of the stuff you’ve probably heard was true. He - well, he was a piece of shit. It’s not much more complicated than that.”

Eddie opened his eyes between her ministrations to peek at her: she had her tongue between her teeth as she thought, and that pinch had reappeared between her brows. “I fought back once, more than I ever had before. My aunt wound up taking custody of me, and I dropped out of everything all at once. Lowkey went into hiding for a bit,” she chuckled. “It was . . . I get that changing everything like that is scary, but I promise it’s worth it, Eddie. Everything is so much lighter.”

“Yeah?” He was unsure exactly how to respond; he didn’t think Myra

was comparable to Bev's father in the least.

"Yes. Especially when you have people like Richie fuckin' Tozier in your life." She met Eddie's eyes, and the firm set of her mouth softened slightly. "He's weirdly good at safeguarding your feelings. Like, don't get me wrong, he's *the worst* -" they both laughed, "- but anybody else messes with you? He's not having it. It's nice to have that sometimes."

Eddie nodded again, and let Bev dab highlight along his cheekbones. "Sounds like it is."

A half hour later, and Eddie found himself in Stan's shirt, wedged between Richie and the window of a cab as they sped down the freeway, out to the distant shores of Santa Monica. Someone had opened the windows, and the tangy-salty wind roared just outside and brushed through his hair, tousling it even more than Bev had. He leaned back, taking in the smell of the ocean, the feel of the setting sun warming his face.

"You're seriously gonna love this," Richie said, directly in his ear. Eddie knew he'd have to do that to be heard over the sound of the wind, but it still sent a subtle shiver down his spine when he did. He wondered if, at this point, Richie had noticed what it was doing to him.

The bar was pretty packed by the time they showed up, the three of them clambering out of the cab with wild, tangled hair. Eddie couldn't help but think that it suited Bev, framing her face like a ginger halo, but he and Richie looked ridiculous. Richie's was especially tangled, all his curls frizzy and falling around his head in snarls. He looked down at Eddie and grinned, and Eddie fought the urge to reach up and help him sort through the mess.

"This is a good look on you, Eds," Richie said, running teasing fingers

through Eddie's hair, fluffing it up even further. "Very woke-up-like-this chic."

"Shut up," Eddie snapped, batting Richie's hand away from his hair, and reaching up to smooth it back down.

"Are you two coming, or are you having your own party out here?"

"We're comin', we're comin', relax," Richie said, looping an arm around Eddie's shoulders and pulling him along towards the bar's entrance, which was strung in multicoloured Christmas lights and gave off a gentle, inviting glow. The noise inside was mostly music, someone blasting Feliz Navidad, a crowd yelling along to the words. Eddie let himself be pulled inside.

They started with shots. It was the holidays, after all, and a time for celebration! That was how Richie justified it anyway, as he pushed a glittery shot glass of tequila over to Eddie, his grin almost maniacal in the dim glow of the bar.

"Don't you people drink anything else?" Eddie asked, wincing as the tequila burned its way down into his stomach.

"You want something else?" Richie asked. The gleam in his eye set Eddie's lips into a worried frown, an unconscious response. He had found that a lot lately: he responded to Richie so naturally, their expressions and movements and words an odd chain of chemical reactions, one after the other, each one as easy and fluid as the last. It was a comfortable tension that Eddie didn't think he'd felt with anyone else.

So when Richie handed him a new shot glass full of something bright green, he moved in tandem, taking the glass before Richie had fully offered it to him, and frowned up at him. "I'm supposed to trust that you're not poisoning me?"

"Yes." Richie leaned forward, and Eddie shuffled onto his toes, tension running through every muscle in his body. Richie's mouth was right next to his ear again, to be heard over the din of the bar. "You're supposed to trust me."

"Yeah, okay, sure," Eddie mocked, right before he swallowed the shot. He slammed the glass down on the bar with maybe more force than necessary, but hardly noticed as he stared up at Richie in shock. "Jesus! What the fuck!"

Richie threw his head back as he laughed at Eddie's dumbstruck face. "Yeah, pretty much. It's got tabasco in it, and some kind of chartreuse, I think - I don't know, I just order it because it tastes like _."

"Fucking salsa verde," Eddie hissed, smacking his tongue against the roof of his mouth to rescue himself. "God, how much tabasco is in that?"

"I don't know, but enough that the bartender always looked worried when I ask for it," Richie said with a grin. "I think it might be a joke drink or something."

"Fuck you."

"You'll have to wait til I'm done with your mom, but sure, later if you want."

"God, you're disgusting!" Eddie leaned away from him, back against the wall of the bar. The crowd was beginning to close in around them, and pressed Richie closer to him. They were lined up awkwardly against each other, Eddie's hip to Richie's upper thigh, Richie's elbow against Eddie's chest.

"Hey, so, the party's starting in, like, half an hour!" Bev materialised next to Richie, surprising both of them; Richie flinched so hard he whacked Eddie in the ribs, and Eddie shoved him in return. Bev just laughed. "We're all gonna head over in, like, twenty minutes, so meet us by the entrance! And try not to kill each other please!" And then she was melting back into the crowd again, and Eddie and Richie were left to their own close-proximity devices.

They looked at each other then, and Eddie was struck by the height Richie had on him; standing so close together, he practically had to crane his neck to meet his eyes.

"I guess we should try and escape the crowd now," Richie said, jerking his chin in the direction of the door. Eddie nodded, and followed him through the crowd. He kept one hand just barely pinching the back of Richie's shirt - a flowy, sheer red number with tiny flowers stitched on it that Eddie thought he'd borrowed from Bev - as he shuffled behind him, weaving between the sweaty, ambling people that surrounded them like a shifting forest.

They made it out into the fresh air outside the bar, and Richie lit up a cigarette before taking one half-hearted puff and then crushing it out on the side of the building. He tossed the cold cigarette into the dumpster in the alleyway next to the bar, and leaned his head back against the wall.

"You . . . what was that?" Eddie asked, bewildered.

Richie snorted, glancing down at him without moving his head. "I'm trying to quit. Stan talked me into it. It's just habit, or whatever. Like I need to do something with my hands or whatever. And I'm too stupid to throw them out - I'm waiting until I finish the box."

Eddie frowned, watching Richie's hands - long, pianist fingers, chapped knuckles - twitch at his side, as though responding to his explanation. Richie shoved them in his pockets, looking back up at the sky and away from Eddie.

Maybe it was because of the salsa verde shot, which was still churning in his stomach and had made him much tipsier than he'd thought it would, a pleasant buzz creeping down into his fingers and toes. Maybe it was how forlorn Richie looked then, hands trapped in his pockets like he didn't think he could trust them. Maybe Eddie was just trying to be nice, for once, or maybe it was because he could still feel the phantom warmth of Richie's thigh against his in the cab. Whatever spurred him on, Eddie found himself darting across the street to a 7-11 on the corner, tossing a "I'll be right back, don't move or die or anything!" over his shoulder.

When he emerged five minutes later, feeling both very stupid and very nervous, he walked back over to Richie with none of the enthusiasm he'd had when jogging away. Richie was watching his approach with a cocked eyebrow.

“Needed some convenience store nachos to go with that salsa verde?” he asked, and Eddie wondered if maybe this was a dreadful idea.

Before he could think too much about it, though, he stuck his hand out to Richie, palm up, an offering. Richie let him drop the shiny packaging into his own hand, and peered down at it.

“Is this . . . Fun Dip?”

“I just thought - I mean, I don’t know, maybe you could use it for - because, you know, with your hands, you were fidgeting, so I thought it would work.” He was staring at the Fun Dip now, the gaudy green-pink-blue packaging proclaiming it to be ‘Rockin’ Raspberry!’ There was a cartoon face wearing sunglasses staring back at Eddie, looking like he was judging every one of his myriad of mistakes, peeking into his foolish soul.

“Thanks, I haven’t had this shit in ages!” Richie broke the silence, tearing open the packet; it ripped loud enough to startle Eddie. Richie was already pulling out the little sugar stick, licking it experimentally. “God, it’s somehow only good because I never eat it.”

Eddie couldn’t help but laugh, tipping his head back to look at the sky of cloud-spat indigo instead of Richie, just a moment of reprieve. Hopefully his face would be less red when he brought himself back down to the ground.

When he did look back at Richie, it was to find him fully engrossed in the Fun Dip, taking long licks of the obnoxiously red powder and smacking his lips. He grinned at Eddie, and held out a freshly-coated stick. “Want some?”

“God, no, that is so fucking unsanitary,” Eddie snapped, face twisting in disgust.

Richie just snorted. “Sweet, more for me.”

“Where’d you get Fun Dip?” They turned to see Bev emerging from the bar, three glossy, shimmery people trailing after her, when she spotted the candy.

Eddie opened his mouth to explain himself in the least-implicating way possible, but Richie beat him to it.

“A gift from Mr. Kaspbrak,” he said, a thick southern twang warping his words. “I do believe he’s going to ask for my hand soon, mark my words Miss Marsh!” His eyes flicked to Eddie, who was helpless under his gaze. “And I do believe I might accept!”

Bev turned her raised eyebrows on Eddie, who mumbled, “He was - I didn’t - he needed a distraction.”

“How much of a distraction?” Bev asked.

Richie held up the two additional packets of Fun Dip Eddie had grabbed in answer. Bev just sighed, a long, knowing whistle through her nose.

“This is gonna be somethin’.”

“I can’t believe he actually gets sugar highs!” Eddie yelled over the steady thwub of the club music blasting through the party. “What is he, seven?!”

“I wish!” Bev yelled back, but she was smiling broadly enough that Eddie knew she was joking. “Then it’d be easier to keep tabs on him!”

“What’re you guys talkin’ about?!” Richie popped up behind Eddie, as he had been doing for the forty minutes since they got to the party. Eddie flinched, just as he had been doing every time.

“Makin’ fun of you!” Bev shouted.

Richie pouted, and held up the trio of shots he had wedged precariously between his hands. “And just when I’ve come bearing gifts!”

“In that case, we apologize profusely!” Bev reached for her shot, and Richie handed it to her with an elaborate flourish, somehow without

spilling a drop. Bev accepted it with a smile.

“Do I get an apology from Sir Edward as well?!”

He'd managed to ask this just as the song faded into quiet, the DJ shifting to some slower songs, and drew a few confused glances that Eddie shied away from.

“Please just give me my shot,” he said, holding out his hand.

“Only if you get my next one,” Richie bargained.

Eddie, not seeing much of an out, sighed. “Alright, alright, you'll get your shot.”

“And so you will get yours!” Richie let Eddie take the shot glass from him, a few drops escaping. Before Eddie could even jerk his hand back to wipe it off on his shorts, Richie had run his index finger along the back of Eddie's hand, catching up the traces of vodka, and licked them right off.

“God, *really* ?!”

“Never let vodka go to waste, Spaghetti,” Richie winked.

“Alright!” Bev shouted, just as the music had begun to slide right back into something upbeat and danceable. “Three, two, one - cheers!”

The three of them knocked the shots back together, Eddie and Richie wincing, Bev laughing at them. Eddie paused, watching the two of them as they leaned into each other, Richie pressing a sloppy kiss to the top of Bev's head. He wanted to catch this moment to hold it, a little keepsake to tuck into his suitcase when he went back to his real life.

“I'm gonna find Gemma! She's the one who invited us!” Bev yelled, gesturing into the distance of the crowd. “I'll catch up with you guys later, alright?!”

“Sick, tell her I say hi and also sorry about the gardner snake!” Richie replied. Bev rolled her eyes and dipped between two dancers,

disappearing.

Eddie looked back at Richie, and the curve of his adam's apple, glowing in the neon lights of the party. He was still clutching his shot glass, and was swishing his hips to the rhythm of the song vibrating through the floor. Watching him was just part of his keepsake, Eddie thought. That was all, why he was still watching him. It was part of his keepsake. He was just trying to hold onto this.

"Aren't you gonna dance with me, angel?" Richie's words wove in and out of the insistent synth, Eddie following his lips to make out what he missed. His mouth was raspberry red. Eddie had never eaten Fun Dip, but wondered if Richie would still taste like it. He wondered if he should find out what Fun Dip tasted like.

"You good?" Richie was suddenly very close to him, and the lights and music seemed to shimmer and twist in the air all around them - they were encased in incandescence.

"Yeah, I'm good, and you're, like, *really* tall."

"Is that so?" Richie laughed. Eddie lapped it up, let it sink into him like a warm breeze.

"Yes. You're very tall, and very loud, and very annoying. I like that." Eddie wasn't sure why he was still talking, but the words seemed to be pouring out of him as if from a broken dam. He wasn't even that drunk - two shots of vodka and a daiquiri, and suddenly he's spilling his guts to whoever is in front of him? What had LA done to his self control?

"You do?" Eddie didn't like how Richie was looking at him, all wide, surprised eyes and a scrunched frown. As if he didn't know what he was doing to Eddie every time he wrapped an arm around his shoulders and steered him into something new and terrifying and spectacular.

"Yeah, *duh* ," Eddie said; hearing himself say " *duh* " aloud made him dissolve into a peal of giggles so powerful he bowed, body folding over as if to invite him to clutch at his stomach, which was flipping over and over - it felt as though he was trying to hold it inside

himself. "You're so *nice* to me, even if you're not being nice. It's nice."

"You're nice," Richie said. He had set down his glass, Eddie didn't know where, and placed his chilled palm on Eddie's cheek. He shivered at the cold and the contact. "Well, you're not really nice *to me* , but you're nice - good. You're good."

"Yeah?" They were swaying to the music, though so off-rhythm that it was a mystery that they even kept going.

"Yeah." Richie smiled, and it outshone all the lights around them. Eddie, dumbstruck, could only watch. "How's the salsa verde treating you, Eds?"

"Fuck you." Eddie laughed, pressing his forehead to Richie's chest for a moment to breathe. He smelled like musk and vanilla and the clean sweat that came from dancing too much. Eddie crinkled his nose and pulled away. "Are you wearing Bev's perfume?"

"I can't believe you noticed that!" Richie cried.

"Of course I did! You usually smell so much -"

"Sexier?"

"Worse."

"Rude!" But Richie was cackling too much to be offended. "God, you're so mean to me, Eddie Spaghetti!"

"M just being honest."

"Can I be honest with you?"

"Yes!" Eddie leaned back away from Richie, leveraging himself with his arms wrapped around Richie's waist. The contact still burned, hot and insistent on his skin, but in that moment the gravity of it hardly mattered. It felt too good to worry.

Richie leaned in, arms coming around Eddie to scoop him up towards his chest. Eddie held his breath, waiting, anticipating, uncertain of

where this was going -

“I *really* wanna get another drink, and I want you to come with me because the bartender doesn’t like me.”

The cab ride didn’t happen, as far as Eddie was concerned. Ever the sleepy drunk, he zoned out the moment Richie reached over to close the door behind him, and was passed out until they pulled up outside of Stan’s wrought iron fence.

Eddie woke up leaning on Richie’s shoulder, which embarrassed him so much that he didn’t even check to see if he had also drooled there; he just shot up, back ramrod straight, when Richie nudged him awake.

“I am so sorry -“ he began, but Richie just laughed.

“Don’t be, you’re cute when you sleep,” he said, and Eddie flushed. “You talk a lot less, which probably helps.”

“Ugh!” Eddie groaned, and clambered out of the cab before Richie could flirt with him in front of the driver any more. He was almost better at shameless PDA than Bill, and that was a high bar to cross.

Richie stumbled out of the cab after him, walking up the driveway to Stan’s front door. They let themselves in and all but collapsed on Stan’s couch for a minute; it was as if returning to a space so cozy and safe had brought on all the exhaustion of the night.

Eddie sighed, stretching and standing first, admiring the red glitter of Bev’s polish on his toes. Walking barefoot in someone else’s house would have seemed ludicrous to him under any other circumstances, but it being Stan’s house somehow made it different. Eddie trusted Stan not to have anything weird or gross anywhere, and not to drop cereal on the floor and just let his dog lap it up, like he’d seen Ben do more than once. He could walk barefoot on Stan’s floors without fear.

“Okay, weird question,” Richie began, dangling off the back of the couch to look at Eddie upside down. His glasses were nearly sliding off his face, and Eddie wanted to reach out and push them back up. So he did; his body moved before his brain could reach the part where it panicked and stopped him. They just slid down Richie’s nose again, so he pushed them up again, one finger pad pressed to the very middle of the frames. Richie went cross-eyed trying to follow the movement. They both laughed when they slipped down again.

“What was your weird question?”

“I don’t know,” Richie mumbled, eyes following the path of Eddie’s hand as it dropped to his side. Then he perked up, and nearly overturned the couch in the process. “Oh! Can I use your shower? Well, Stan’s shower I guess?”

“Oh, uh, sure?” Eddie frowned, uncertain about the new territory he was now treading on. How far was too far to go with Stan’s best friend? Was showering in the same house somehow crossing a line of intimacy that they couldn’t get back from?

“Sweet,” Richie said, rolling off the couch and striding past Eddie, his gait tilting slightly as he hurried up the stairs. “I hope Stan has that shea stuff, I love that stuff.”

Eddie followed him upstairs warily, hovering in the doorway to the bedroom as Richie bounded into the adjoining bathroom. He shut the door soundly behind him before Eddie could even ask if he was alright to stay in the room.

He entered cautiously, though his initial tension ebbed away the longer the bathroom door remained shut. He peeled off his outfit and changed into pyjamas, then settled himself on top of the bedspread to scroll through his phone, and coo to himself about the assortment of cute animal photos Mike had sent him. This was a clear sign that Mike was drunk; it seemed things were getting pretty fun in Boston, too.

Eddie was so absorbed in his phone that he was startled when the bathroom door swung open to reveal Richie, hair wet and clad in nothing but a towel around his waist. Steam still wafted from his

pinked skin as he padded into Stan's bedroom, and he grinned at Eddie, a dopey smile that drew a small smile out of Eddie.

"Thanks, I felt so nasty," he said, and dug through one of Stan's bottom drawers. He pulled out a pair of worn flannel pyjama pants and a Ramones t shirt. "I have a stash of my stuff here," Richie explained, meeting Eddie's confused gaze. "I sleep over a lot."

Eddie nodded slowly, the remaining vodka carrying his thoughts along like a lazy river. "So you two . . . I mean, you've . . . you're . . .?"

Richie stared at him for a long moment before snorting, shaking his head; water splattered onto the bedspread, and Eddie yanked it away from him with a scowl. "Me and Stan? Together? Fuck no, we're . . . I mean, like, once in college. Experimenting phase, you know?"

"And what were the results?" Eddie tried to keep the curiosity out of his voice, but he didn't think it was working that well.

"Wouldn't you like to know," Richie teased; Eddie swore his grin widened at Eddie's blush. "But seriously, the results? Lotta gay, but not for each other."

"Oh."

"Yeah." Richie vanished back into the bathroom, and re-emerged in his pjs. He did this without even asking if Eddie wanted to maintain their modesty, just went right to the part where he didn't try to make him uncomfortable, and so Eddie said nothing when Richie flopped onto the bed next to him.

"What about you, hm? Mr. New England, you have any wild college trysts I should know about?"

Eddie snorted. "My friend Bill is absolutely gay, but I'm not his type. He likes *tall* guys - well, taller than him, anyway." Eddie didn't think it important to add that he also leaned towards the vertically endowed.

"Ohhhh, then I hope he enjoys Stan," Richie said with a laugh. He had settled his head back against one of the pillows, and was looking

straight up at the ceiling. Eddie did, too, next to him, and it felt like they were in the Planetarium again.

“Really?”

“Oh yeah - very tall, very pretty, very gay. Cody *did* just dump him, though, so I don’t know if he’d go for anyone right now,” he added.

“Cody?” Eddie echoed.

“Yeah - Stan’s complete *dick* of an ex-boyfriend. He broke up with him literally the day we messaged you about swapping houses.”

“That’s why Stan had to get out of LA?” Eddie asked, shifting to look at Richie.

Richie turned to face him, too, and nodded. “He dumped, like, half of Stan’s clothes on his front lawn.”

“Sounds like a fucking drama queen.”

“That’s what I said!” Richie laughed, and he lifted slightly off the mattress when he did; Eddie took note of this, for some reason, watching the way he rose with the bursts of his laughter.

“So is Cody why Stan wanted to get out of Los Angeles?” Eddie knew he had no reason to pry so heavily into Stan’s personal life, even if he was staying in his house. But he wanted to hear Richie keep talking.

“I think so. He didn’t say it outright, but I think Cody was kind of a last straw for him.” Richie looked over at Eddie, face set. Eddie noticed for the first time since Richie had left the bathroom that he wasn’t wearing his glasses; his eyes looked much smaller without them, but gleamed bright through the dimness.

“Why did you come here?” It wasn’t what Eddie had been expecting him to ask. He frowned as Richie leaned closer. “In your ad, you said the world was out to get you, or something. You wanted to escape something? What were you escaping from?”

Eddie said nothing, just stared back at Richie; their faces were less than a foot apart. They were fully turned towards each other now,

curled in like a pair of inverted quotation marks. “You’re not wearing your glasses. Can you see?”

“Shapes and colours,” Richie said. He sat up, reaching blindly over on the nightstand next to Stan’s bed; he awkwardly retrieved his glasses, almost knocking them to the ground, and slid them back on before dropping back onto the pillow. “There. Now I can see how cute you are.”

“Ugh, fuck off,” Eddie groaned, because he wanted to want Richie to be kidding. It would be easier if he was.

There was a long pause, several minutes of steady quiet that Eddie let himself float in. It was almost blissful, the weight of Richie next to him on the mattress a reassuring dip Eddie could feel. He broke the quiet, if only to maintain it the only way he could think to.

“You can just sleep up here tonight,” Eddie whispered, before he could think better of it. Vodka was doing wonders for his ability to avoid self-sabotage. “I mean, if you want to. Unless you don’t, then don’t. Or whatever.”

“Huh?” Richie blinked at him, slowly, and Eddie was reminded of the face Mike’s cat made when waking from a nap. “In the bed? Are you sure?”

“It’s a big bed,” Eddie said, and immediately regretted his entire existence. “And you’ve gone and soaked that pillow anyway, you idiot, so you might as well just sleep on it.”

Richie looked down at the pillow, dampened from his hair, and then back up at Eddie. He dropped back onto it without much more preamble, and offered him a broad, gentle smile. Eddie could only smile back, and hope his didn’t look too pained. It was taking real effort not to brush Richie’s hair out of his eyes.

Eddie laid back down, movements slow and ginger, and faced the ceiling. He could feel Richie watching him, but closed his eyes, hoping for sleep to swallow him whole.

“Night, Spaghetti,” Richie whispered.

“Night,” Eddie mumbled. “Try not to steal the blankets.”

“No promises.”

Notes for the Chapter:

i literally went and rewatched the christmas episode of the office to write that first scene, so do i get brownie points for doing my research (also now i've been jamming to 'you oughta know' for days holy shit)

tysm for the continued response to this story, you're all so so sweet !!! i think i'm gonna keep aiming for this once a week update system, though they might come a bit faster after next week once all my finals are out of the way <3 <3 the next chapter is a bit of a new one, so hopefully it goes alright

hmu on tumblr @thatsjustfangtastic , and merry almost-christmas-season everybody !!

also i found an article when looking for this chapter's title proclaiming that wonderful christmas time by paul mccartney is the worst christmas song ever, so quick poll: is this actually something ppl think?? bc i have some that i hate way more lmao

9. this year (i'll give it to someone special)

Oh Joy's americanos, Stan was quickly learning, were some of the best he had ever had. He wasn't sure how exactly they did this - it wasn't a very complicated drink, and there was little about espresso and hot water that someone could mess up - but he decided after his second sip that he wouldn't question it.

Ben had tried to sell him on the ginger cookies when they came in, but Stan had stuck with veggie curry pie. He thought about Bill when he took his first bite, and then he remembered the feeling of Bill's hands splayed across the bare skin of his back, and then he had to take a long sip of coffee to bring himself back to the conversation and away from the fantasy his brain had begun to spiral into.

God, that was an awful sign.

Across from him at the table, Ben had a folder of papers and a tablet open, flicking through documents and scribbling down notes. He had said he'd needed some time to work on editing a coworker's article, and had asked if Stan wanted to visit Oh Joy again, maybe get some time out of the house. Stan had agreed, if only because Bill was working from home next door and he didn't know if he trusted himself not to go over. Removing the temptation altogether seemed sensible.

"So, which department are you in?" Stan asked, trying not to be rude. He knew Ben hadn't been expecting him to chat and hang out, as he had assured him as such when he'd called and asked him to meet. But Stan's mother had drilled manners into him too effectively as a child for him to ignore Ben completely.

"Oh, I mostly cover stuff in the sports department," Ben said with a shrug. "It wasn't exactly my first choice, but my supervisor is pretty cool and also couldn't care less about sports, so it's not too bad. I've learned a lot, which I guess can't be said for everyone there."

That was another reason for Stan not to ignore him: Ben Hanscom was an absolute sweetheart, and it seemed a waste not to talk to him. He said all of this with a kind of bemused half-smile, as though it was

his fault for landing in the wrong department and he wanted to make up for it.

“How do you write about something you’re so neutral on?” Stan poked at his pie with his fork, and tried not to connect the smell of curried peas with Bill’s smile. “Isn’t sports reporting kind of . . . I don’t know, passionate?”

Ben laughed, shaking his head. “Not really. It’s mostly facts and figures that we talk about - if we got too passionate, we’d turn into the opinion section.” The way he said this made it sound like a joke he’d heard a lot. “The passion mostly comes from fans, not us. Thank God, because I don’t think I could fake that.” Ben took a long drink from his coffee - plain old coffee, two creams, as he had insisted it helped him work better than fancy drinks. “What d’you do, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Oh. I’m an agent, in entertainment.” Stan shrugged, uncertain. “Not for anyone you know, probably. I mostly handle behind-the-scenes stuff, manage smaller clients. It’s not very exciting.”

“Still sounds cool,” Ben said. “What kind of smaller clients?”

“A lot of independent writers, actually, in comedy. Indie actors, that kind of thing.” He picked up a forkful of pie, determined to focus on how good it tasted and not Bill’s eyes, or the memory of Cody’s blank gaze that was emerging in his mind. He had certainly never thought Stan’s work was interesting.

“Comedy?” Ben repeated. “Huh. You don’t . . . huh.”

“What?” Stan asked flatly.

“You just don’t seem like the comedian type. Like, your clients must drive you insane.”

Stan thought about Richie and the time he had tried to make the toilet in his place a baking soda volcano (sorry, *caldera*), and couldn’t hold back his small sigh. “You could say that.”

Ben laughed. “Someone in particular coming to mind?”

"I didn't think it was that obvious," Stan admitted, stirring his coffee absently with a spoon. "He's a friend of mine, actually, not just a client. Richie. He's . . . well, he's doing his best. He mostly writes, but he's got the stage presence for performing - which is what I keep telling him to do."

"He's a friend?" Ben asked curiously. "D'you think he's wormed his way into Eddie's vacation like we've done to yours?"

Stan frowned, thinking hard about Richie and Bev downing homemade daiquiris in his kitchen, Eddie Kaspbrak sitting at the island, maybe in one of the chino and button down combinations Stan had found folded neatly in his drawers. He was growing more and more worried as daydream-Richie started doing the macarena; he was still wearing his palm tree and Christmas lights shirt in Stan's imagination. "I sincerely hope not, for Eddie's sake."

"That bad?" Ben asked, amused.

"He once tried to con the same bar out of free birthday shots three times in one week."

"Oh, Eddie's gonna have a fantastic time with him."

"Oh, God." Stan had lowered his face into his hands, thinking about all the ways Richie could be slowly breaking Eddie across the country. He could only pray to Bev to keep him safe and sane.

"What's his last name?" Ben asked.

"Tozier," Stan said, without looking up. When he did, he saw Ben scrolling through something on his phone.

Ben snorted. "Sorry, I just had to check - and he is so comically Eddie's type."

"Is he?" Stan asked, baffled. Richie was capable of being someone's *type* ?

"How crazy is that?" Ben asked, still chuckling. "Going to the other end of the country and accidentally spending your holiday with someone who's the exact kind of person you'd fall for."

"Yeah . . . that's crazy." Stan traced his fingertip along the ridge of his mug's handle, pressing his lips together in a firm line. He wasn't thinking about Bill. He wasn't thinking about Bill. He was thinking about Emu the fat squirrel, and Richie flirting obnoxiously with Eddie, and definitely not Bill - even if the image of Bill bathed in the sprawling lights of the city had been printed onto the insides of his eyelids.

"You alright?" Stan's eyes flicked up to meet Ben's, who was watching him with a curiously quirked eyebrow.

"Yes, fine," Stan said, and sounded unconvincing even to his own ears.

"Right." Ben tapped unevenly on the file in front of him, gaze not straying from Stan's face. "Is there anything you want to talk about? You know, about . . . the city?" *Or anybody in it* seemed to echo in the quiet after his words.

"I . . . no, I - well . . ." God, this felt so hopeless. He and Bill were having a fun, meaningless fling over the holidays, and now he wanted to ruin all of that by involving all of Bill's closest friends? Was he out of his mind?

Stan's conflicted silence hovered over the two of them for several minutes, while Ben skimmed the paperwork he'd brought with him. Finally, as Stan was draining the last of his coffee, Ben spoke.

"Look." Stan did; Ben's eyes, warm brown and winged by the faint crinkles of smile lines in the making, bore into his with an unexpected intensity. It was as if Ben *knew*, knew exactly what had been running through Stan's head this whole morning, and knew things even beyond that, which Stan did not.

"I'm not gonna pretend to be an expert on you or Bill," Ben said, and Stan let out a single, violent, startled cough. Ben just sighed quietly through his nose. "But I do know Bill. He's one of my best friends. And he's . . . well, he's not fantastic at relationships."

"We're not in a relationship," Stan said, quickly and before he could stop himself.

“Okay, then he’s not fantastic at hypothetical relationships with people who are not you,” Ben replied, chin resting on a loose fist. He looked as though these kinds of talks were not new to him. “And . . . hypothetically, when Bill has . . . *hypothetical* feelings for hypothetical people, he’s not great at accepting that. He’s . . . well, he’s a bit of an idiot, actually. He needs a bit of a push, from this person.”

“Hypothetically,” Stan said.

“Yeah, this hypothetical person would have to give him a hypothetical push. They’d have to . . . God, I dunno, make sure he knows where they stand. Hypothetically.”

“Okay.” Stan just nodded, uncertain how much response he needed to give.

Ben just flipped his folder closed and tucked it back in his bag. “I just thought you should know. He’s a good person, and he . . . I mean, he deserves to be happy.”

“Yeah. He does.”

Ben smiled at him as he stood from the table, bag slung over one shoulder. “I just think you probably could help with that.”

Georgie had gone to bed an hour ago, and Bill was left to sit in the living room and think about his very limited good options. He was the man with the plan, he was the one with the ideas - certainly he could come up with one for this.

Option 1: he called Eddie for advice, and also to confess that he had slept with Stan. Eddie, he knew, wouldn’t be thrilled with either of these things, and might not be a smidge of help. He had never exactly been one for sage words of wisdom. But Bill couldn’t stop thinking about needing to call him, just to keep him in the loop.

Option 2: call things off with Stan right before he left for Los Angeles, and never speak to him again, without really thinking through the ramifications of this. Bill hated this idea more than he did the first one, and thinking about breaking things off so suddenly and coldly with Stan left him feeling oddly hollow.

Option 3: tell Stan how he really felt, once again without consulting anyone. This idea was perhaps the most and least appealing at the exact same time. Bill had played out fantasy versions of his confession to Stan, and they all happened over cups of tea, curled up on Eddie's couch, and Stan always reciprocated in full. This was ridiculous, of course. Stan had agreed verbally to an inconsequential holiday fling - Bill himself had suggested such an arrangement. He was really, *really* regretting that phrasing now. This option seemed as though it would have the hardest consequences, but feel the most emotionally cathartic.

Option 4: call Mike, and have the next-best (or potentially more wise) leader tell him exactly what to do.

He called Mike.

"Hey, everything good?"

Bill frowned. "Does s- something have t- to not be good for me to call one of my best f- friends?"

"To make an actual phone call, and not text me? Yes." Bill could practically hear Mike's teasing smile through the phone. "But seriously, what's up?"

"I, uh . . ." Bill floundered for a moment, searching for the words that would ask for help without revealing how much of a hopeless idiot he had been. "I nuh- need your advice."

"Oh?" Mike had shifted from chill to Alert Mode in a couple of nanoseconds, which did not ease Bill's nerves. "What sort of advice?"

"The kind w- where you don't ask a t- ton of questions about w- what I need it f- for?" Bill said uncertainly. "And maybe don't try to guess w- what kind of m- mess I've got- tten myself into?"

“Should I be worried?”

“No?” Bill sighed; he hadn’t meant for that to come out as a question. “No. N- not w- worried. I’m all good. I just th- think . . . if you w- were doing stuff w- with somebody, wi- with no commitment or struh- strings attached or w- whatever, but youw- wanted to, like, add s- some strings to it . . . w- would you tell them? Or just luh- let it go?”

Mike’s sigh wasn’t the most encouraging thing Bill had heard that day. “Is this about Stan?”

“I remem- member saying no questions,” Bill countered, though it was a weak defense and he knew it. Mike was one of his best friends; he had him figured out, no matter what. He should’ve known better than to think he could sneak something like this from him.

“And I remember the way you were looking at him his first night here,” Mike said, his grin shining through in his voice. “You’re not the most subtle man on Earth, Bill.”

“Oh, sh- shut up,” Bill grumbled. “Does Ben know?”

“Is there anything Ben doesn’t know?”

“Touche,” Bill said, tipping his head back against the couch, listless and frustrated. “S- so?”

“I think you’re being an idiot,” Mike said. “My advice is to stop that immediately.”

“And w- why w- would I do that?”

“Because I also saw how Stan looked at you his first night here. One of you needs to stop being so stupid, it might as well be you.”

Bill called Eddie next, forehead pressed resolutely against his wall as it rang.

“Bill?” Eddie’s voice was groggy, and Bill spent twenty seconds of silence calculating the time in Los Angeles before giving up.

“Bill?” Eddie repeated, and Bill realized that he had called Eddie at a (presumably) ungodly hour, and silently breathed down the line like a serial killer, and that maybe he needed to say something.

“Y- yeah.” He gulped, thinking. He felt odd, like his brain was racing while simultaneously having nothing running through it. *I slept with Stan. I slept with Stan. I slept with Stan.* Say something tactful.

“I slept w- with Stuh- Stan?”

Eddie was quiet as Bill gently smacked his forehead against the wall, biting back a groan. Then, “Was that a question?”

“Oh m- my God,” Bill said, pulling away from the wall to flop backwards over the arm of his couch. “Oh my God, sh- shut up. You know w- what I meant.”

“No, I really don’t,” Eddie said. Bill couldn’t seem to figure out if he sounded angry, or if Bill was imagining it. “Because that would mean you fucked the guy living in my house right now, and that - oh, shit, did you do it *on my bed* ?!”

“Is that imp- portant?” Bill asked; distantly, he thought maybe he heard Eddie shriek into a pillow.

“Yes! Definitely! Holy shit!”

“Okay, okay, I g- get it, alright . . .” Bill turned his face into the back of his couch, voice muffling. He didn’t care. This phone call was as painful as he had thought it would be. *Cathartic my ass, Michael* , he thought bitterly.

“. . . why did you sleep with him, William? Why did you *have* to sleep with him?”

“You never s- said he’d be this p- pretty,” Bill snapped.

“That’s it?” Eddie sounded so exasperated that Bill felt a twinge of guilt. “That’s why? You know he came to Boston to get away from a

shitty breakup, right? And you just go and . . . oh my God, Bill.”

“I nuh- knew about the breakup,” Bill mumbled. “He t- told me.”

“He . . . told you?”

“Yeah.”

“. . . oh.”

“W- what d’you mean ‘*oh*’?”

Stan was draped over Eddie’s couch, skimming through a William King novel, when Richie called him. For a moment he wasn’t sure if he was reading the screen correctly; neither Bev nor Richie had called him since he’d come to Boston. They had sent him some occasional texts, mostly well wishes and checking in - they had promised to give him some space as part of his Holiday of Freedom.

But that was Richie’s name on his phone screen, and that was also Richie’s obnoxious “Hey, Staniel!” on the line when Stan picked up.

“Hey yourself,” Stan said slowly, uncertain. “What . . . why are you calling me?”

“I can’t call my best friend to say hello?” Richie exclaimed. “Does my company mean *nothing* to you?!”

“. . . Are you done?”

“Yes.”

“Spectacular.”

Stan heard Richie sigh through the phone, and found himself frowning. That was a startlingly unfamiliar sound. “Richie, why are you calling me?”

Richie sighed again, and there it was: an odd lack of drama. Richie

sighed, sure. He moaned and groaned and lay over Stan's furniture and put on airy, southern belle voices to proclaim his woe as he did so. But Richie didn't *sigh* . Not for real. Not the way he was at the other end of that phone line.

"I just . . . I have to ask you something."

"Oh?" Stan pursed his lips, wondering if he was the best person to be giving out advice in the state of absurdity he'd found himself stuck in. "What about?"

"I - well, I may have possibly - I think I wanna date your houseswapmate."

There was a long beat of thick silence. Then -

"You want to *what* ?"

"I - ugh, *fuck* . I like Eddie. I think Eddie is cute. He's really cute. Have you *seen* him, Stan? He's so fucking cute! Like, an unfair amount!" Stan could practically hear Richie's wild hand gestures through the phone.

"Okay, I mean, I guess I've seen photos of him - but Richie, he's - well - oh my God!" Stan wasn't sure why Richie wanting to date Eddie Kaspbrak was such an issue for him, but the entire idea was threatening to crack him right down the middle and leave him halved and deeply upset. It was familiar in a way that Stan didn't appreciate.

"I know!" Richie sounded equally as exasperated with himself as Stan was, which was helping matters. At least this was a universally-understood Stressful Thing.

"Richie . . ." Stan began, wondering if this question was even worth asking. "Have you two . . .?"

"No! I'm not ridiculous, Stan, I wasn't gonna just *sleep with him* and then *never see him again* , that would have driven me *insane* ! Holiday flings have never once ended well!"

"Yeah . . ." Stan trailed off, grimacing to himself. Unfortunately for

him, Richie was well-versed in the art of Stan Uris Tones, and caught his uncertain waver.

“You *didn’t* .”

“I - I - well, I -” Stan sputtered, frustrated at the prospect of being scolded by Richie of all people, when another incoming call set his phone buzzing again. He pulled it back to read the name ‘Eddie’ and clapped it back to his ear with enough force to sting. “Oh no.”

“Oh no, what? What’s wrong?”

“Eddie’s calling me right now.”

“Oh *shit* ! Answer, answer, answer, don’t let him know anything’s wrong -”

“Okay, okay, alright!” Stan accepted Eddie’s call, putting Richie on hold, and said in the calmest voice he could muster, “Hi, Eddie.”

“Hi.” Eddie said this so curtly that Stan felt a flash of worry that he had somehow done something to ruin Eddie’s day, and then panicked remembering that he had in fact ruined Eddie’s holiday by hooking up with his best friend while living in his house, thoroughly disrespecting his boundaries. Right.

“I just wanted to apologize for Bill.”

Stan opened his mouth to speak, realized that no words could or would come out, and decidedly closed it again. Eddie pressed forward, seemingly oblivious.

“He totally overstepped, and I’m sorry if he’s been bothering you while you’re in Boston.”

Stan looked up, as though he could see right through the wall of the two houses and spot Bill in his living room, possibly entirely oblivious to this phone call. But, wait, he couldn’t be oblivious, because -

“Did he - did he tell you that we -?” Stan couldn’t seem to get the words out for a moment, and took a breath to steady himself. “He

said that we've been spending time together?"

"Uh - something like that, yeah," Eddie said, and Stan had to glare through those walls at Bill. He had told Eddie that they'd slept together.

"Oh."

"Yeah." Eddie seemed to pause, as if gathering his thoughts, and Stan couldn't blame him. This entire situation had become so bizarre. "Anyway, just wanted to apologize for him worming his way into your vacation."

"It's fine!" Stan burst out, finally finding the words he needed to unwind whatever this situation was. "It's alright, he's - he's really nice." He winced; God, what would *that* mean to Eddie, knowing what he knew? "He's just - don't worry about it."

"Oh . . . t hat's good. I'm glad he's being . . . nice." There was a little too much sly knowing in Eddie's voice for Stan's comfort. He responded the only way he could think of to move on from him and Bill: spite.

"I'm sorry Richie's been bothering you, though," Stan said. "He can be a bit of a pain if you aren't used to him."

"Oh!" Eddie squeaked the word, though he was still loud enough that Stan jolted the phone away from his ear instinctively. "It's fine! Richie's been, uh, really - he's been sweet, actually. So don't worry about it. It's all good." He had clearly hit a nerve with Eddie, though it didn't sound as overwhelmingly negative and annoyed as Stan had expected. He wondered how sorry on Richie's behalf he really needed to be.

"That's good," Stan said. "I'm glad he's not been the worst."

"No, yeah, he's fine," Eddie rushed out, and tentatively added, "Uh, just one second, I have to finish another call."

Eddie, bubbling with intrigue at Stan's defense of Bill, clicked back to Bill's call. "Oh my God, what did you do with him? I think he really likes you, it's - I mean, he practically *shouted* that you're, like, nice and wonderful, holy *shit* , Bill -"

"Eddie?"

Every nerve in his body seemed to freeze and ignite at the same time. ". . . Yeah?"

"I . . . what?" Stan's voice had gone faint, and Eddie couldn't help but picture him holding the phone from his ear, confusion painted across his face. He winced at the image, panic already building in his chest.

"Oh my God, no, I - bye!" Eddie hung up. Then he flung his phone onto the other end of the bed, just for good measure. Stan's bed.

He was sitting on Stan's bed. He was cozied up on Stan's bed, and he had just betrayed his trust entirely. He'd also maybe said Stan's best friend (who was occupying a worrying amount of Eddie's brain capacity) was *sweet* . He rocketed off the covers, horror-stricken.

"Oh, fuck!"

Stan stood, baffled, in the middle of Eddie's living room. His phone was still held loosely by his side, and he drew it to his ear tentatively. Eddie had hung up in a near-panic, and so Stan had been left alone with Richie on the other line.

"Richie?" he asked quietly, contemplative. Eddie's words - *he's been sweet* - echoed dimly in his brain.

"Yeah, Stan-Man?" Richie sounded a bit lost. "Everything okay?"

"I -" Stan paused, uncertain. Where would he even begin to explain this okay-but-also-not-okay situation? "Maybe. I think so. Soon."

"That sounds . . . weird."

“Have you asked Eddie out yet?” Stan wasn’t sure specifically what compelled him to ask it, but he couldn’t seem to get their voices out of his head: Richie, frustrated and enamoured; Eddie, startled and endeared. They sounded so hopeless. They sounded so familiar.

“What?” Richie squawked. “No, I haven’t, I’m not -”

“Richie?” Stan said again, which quieted his best friend. “I need you - and Eddie, quite frankly - to get your respective shit together. Thank you.”

“Are you gonna do that?” Richie shot back, though there was no spite in his voice. “You gonna get your shit together over there, Uris?”

Stan rubbed a hand over his eyes, as though he could ease the headache he could sense building there. He was in the middle of a decided mess. He wasn’t sure if he didn’t like it.

“Yeah. I think I am.”

“Good for you, S-Dog.”

“Shut up,” Stan said with a snort, and hung up.

He needed to think this through. This was - well, it was complicated now. Eddie’s gushing over the phone had been baffling but made more and more sense as he thought about it: he’d been talking to Bill, obviously, or at least trying to. Bill wanted to know what Stan thought of him. Bill was talking to other people about Stan. Bill was sitting next door in his house, thinking about Stan, while Stan sat in Eddie’s house and thought about Bill. This felt like a significant enough development to force Stan to lay down on the couch, hesitation and frustration battering his mind like falling hail.

Stan heard Bill’s front door close, and his head snapped to his own front door. The idea that Bill was out and about and moving along with his life without knowing how Stan felt, what he wanted, felt near-unbearable now. There was a startling sense of urgency running through him, as though he was under a time limit. As if this was his last chance to waltz over to the Denbrough home, and get a good, long look at Bill’s dumb, adorable face.

Stan stepped into his slippers, forgetting about his boots entirely as he stepped outside.

Bill was hovering in the tiny space between the two houses, watching Stan's doorstep.

He looked surprised to see Stan as he made his way over to stand in front of him. He gave Stan a quick once-over that made Stan blush, and Bill frowned. "You're not w- wearing boots."

Stan shrugged, glancing down at his slipper-clad feet; he could feel the snow soaking through the fabric, and winced. "Forgot about the snow."

"F- forgot about the s- snow?" Bill laughed, and reached out to take Stan's sleeve. Stan looked back up, then, and met those bright, shining blue eyes. He felt underdressed and delightfully foolish under the shining light of Bill's smile. Was this what it was like to be Richie? Making poor decisions and having people adore you regardless?

But no. This was what it was like to be around Bill. The shine he gave off was just part of him, how he looked at people. How he looked at Stan.

"I was just talking to Eddie -" Stan started, and Bill's brow furrowed.

"So w- was I."

"Oh?" Stan's voice cracked slightly, and he pressed his lips together, waiting for Bill to rescue him from the silence that followed.

He did. Of course he did. The idea of Bill not coming to Stan's rescue was beginning to sound patently ridiculous, which was a notion that made Stan feel both very nervous and very thrilled.

"Yeah, I . . . w- we, uh . . . w- we maybe tuh- talked about you?"

"Me?" Stan echoed.

"Yeah, y- you, and your . . . I muh- mean . . . *fuck* ." Bill let go of Stan's sleeve, Stan instantly missing the contact; but Bill had just

freed his hand to take Stan's arm, nudging him closer with a gentle tug. He was looking at every spot of Stan's face except his eyes, and Stan waited until their gazes finally met to speak.

"I thought I wanted this to be inconsequential," he said. His voice seemed to carry in the late, snowy evening. Bill watched him, enraptured. "But that was . . . I think that was stupid. I think I only wanted that because I didn't know you yet, not - not like now."

"And w- what do you w- want, now that you know m- me?" Bill's question was a hushed whisper, a warm breath on Stan's cheek.

"I want consequences," Stan said, and frowned. "Well, I mean, not in a bad way, I just meant that I want -"

"I g- get it," Bill said, his mouth curling up into a half-smile. "I get it, I - g- God, I get it."

He pulled Stan closer, and mumbled, "I w- would also really likesuh-some consequences."

"Oh, good," Stan whispered, snorting. "It would've been so awkward if it was just me."

"It w- was never just yuh- you," Bill said softly. His index finger traced along the length of Stan's jaw, moving up so he could thread his fingers through Stan's curls. "I w- was alwuh- ways interested in conseqwuh- quences."

Stan's mouth quirked to the side, and he watched Bill's eyes follow the movement. "Can I stop calling it 'consequences' and just say I want to date you?"

"Absolutely," Bill said, grinning, and he leaned forward to kiss Stan, gentle and slow. He took his time with it. Stan didn't mind; they had as much time as they wanted. He'd make more time, if need be, so he could kiss Bill like that.

Notes for the Chapter:

so!!!! stenbrough is Together!!! i don't think there's gonna be anymore angst for these two, just cute fluffy nonsense. (also the reddie fallout of this chapter is gonna be so much fun to write holy shit lmao)

tysm for the continued support and love for this story, i hope this is a good stenbrough resolution for everyone who was following for that <3 <3

also i've just started another it fic that's primarily reddie (other relationships are pending lmao) that's an au based on the youtube cooking shows i like too much

[bon appetit au fic here](#)

10. everyone dancin' merrily

“Richie . . . have you two . . .?”

Stan’s question had been ringing in Richie’s head for two days.

Richie Tozier thought of himself as pretty pliant, pretty unshakeable. The world tossed nonsense and hurt and confusion at him? He’d toss his own nonsense right back at it, and deflect well enough to hold his life together. He’d been doing it for years, and he doubted he would quit now.

But still. Stan’s incredulity was . . . startling. It stung, like a pinch, small and direct and baffling.

Had Richie and Eddie slept together? No. Had they gone on a date? No. Because Richie had taken one look at Eddie - all soft brown eyes and reluctantly quirked smile and a truly adorable pink pyjama shirt with jack russell terriers all over it - and known that deflection was exactly what he had to do. If he hadn’t leapt straight from ‘cute boy = maybe sex?’ to ‘cute boy = heartbreak, do not engage’, then he might’ve, as he told Stan, been driven out of his mind for a few weeks.

He hadn’t seen Eddie since the morning before the phone call, though not for lack of trying. He had spent the time holed up in his apartment, mostly, writing and wandering from the bed to the fridge and back again in a listless cycle. He had called Eddie, hoping to hang out, but Eddie had feigned sickness the first day and hadn’t answered Richie’s call the second day. The dawning of Day Three of not seeing Eddie was promising to be just as hopeless.

That is, until Bev Marsh kicked down his front door. (Or maybe his second front door - he wasn’t really sure how that term worked in the context of an apartment.)

Bev appeared like an angel, red hair a bright halo, as she marched into his living room. Richie was curled up on his couch, laptop next to him, a bag of Fritos in his hand. He wasn’t wearing pants, and gently informed Bev of this.

"I figured," she said flatly, crossing her arms as she regarded him. He felt uncomfortably scrutinized. "You've been locked away for two days, and barely answered texts. I haven't gotten a stupid meme from you in forty eight hours, and kind of assumed you'd been kidnapped."

"I have," Richie said with a long sigh. "By unrequited love."

"I hate you," Bev said, snuggling up next to him and stealing a Frito. Richie squawked in protest, but knew it was no use. "You're being an idiot, and you're making things weird by avoiding him."

God he seriously regretted ever gossiping about his own love life to Bev. He should have known it would give her a new reason to give him the patented Bev Marsh Eyebrow Raise of Disapproval. "Who am I avoiding?" Richie demanded, petulant as ever. If Bev was going to scold him, she was going to have to work for it.

"Eddie. You're avoiding Eddie."

"It's not my fault things are weird now!" Richie exclaimed. "And Eddie's the one avoiding me!"

"Ugh, you just -" Bev groaned in frustration, and levelled Richie with her best disapproving glare (which was a pretty good one). "You know he fucking likes you, right? And he's probably avoiding you because of that?"

"No, I don't know that, Beverly," Richie shot back, going on the defensive. "And you don't either. And it wouldn't matter anyway, because he's leaving in a few days anyway. Who cares if he likes me?" *And I like him* issued through Richie's mind, but he chose to ignore that addendum. Things would only hurt more later if he started putting those two ideas next to each other.

"God, Richie, long-distance relationships are a thing!"

"Not for me," Richie mumbled, turning his face into the cushion of the couch. "I can't. He's too cute, I'll die."

"You're not gonna die," Bev said.

"I am too."

“Nope.”

“God, you are *no* help!”

“That’s because you have to help yourself, dude.” Bev gave Richie a single, gentle pat on the head. Her eyes were soft with fond exasperation, which Richie appreciated. He loved Bev, but not so much when she was mad at him. “Only you can deal with this. Why can’t you just ask him out, or tell him how you feel?”

“Because he got me Fun Dip!” Richie nearly shouted. “Because he’s nice, and cute, and he’s so weird and - and thoughtful, and I like him too much. I like him too much. I don’t want him to go away.” His words came out small, and he pressed his face further into the couch in embarrassment. He could picture it already: him and Eddie, kissing at sunset, maybe in Stan’s backyard, and then Eddie vanishing from Richie’s world, promising to call, promising to text, and then never being seen or heard from again. Richie would wait, alone, because of course he would; he’d never been one for romantic self preservation before. He would wait, because he would care, and he would be left on his own to stew in his own loneliness, alone . . .

He felt Bev’s hand on his shoulder, feather-light. She was always so wary of touch, but she had grown to make more and more exceptions for Richie and Stan over the years. He appreciated it maybe more than she would ever know. Now, her palm ghosted over his shoulder, and when she spoke, she did so with a coaxing, patient tone. As previously stated, Bev Marsh was an angel.

“Richie . . . I don’t think he will. Not really. Not if the past week and a half is anything to go by. He . . . I think he cares about you, genuinely. And I think you two would . . . I mean, I guess you’d work it out.” She sighed, and Richie pushed his face back into the dim light of the living room to see Bev half-smiling down at him. She pushed some of his mussed hair out of his face. “Or maybe you could just hope for, I don’t know, a Christmas miracle or something. You just gotta talk to him, Richie. Because if you stay trapped in this living room any longer, I will personally kick you out myself and drive you over.”

“You can’t drive.”

“I’ll figure it out.”

Richie snorted. Bev had managed to coax a small smile to his face, and he let it grow as he sat up. Suddenly, Day Three of his Eddie-less existence was seeming significantly less hopeless.

“A Christmas miracle, huh?”

When Eddie opened the door, Richie was momentarily breathless. This had happened nearly every time he saw Eddie, but he still hadn’t gotten used to it. Instead, he felt the rush of his heartbeat like the drop of a rollercoaster, adrenaline that egged him on, tempted him to lunge forward and hug him or kiss him or do something equally embarrassing and terrible. So Richie shoved his hands in his jeans pockets and plastered a grin to his face and tried not to think about it.

“Long time no see, my good dude!”

Eddie just raised an eyebrow, and Richie was reminded how much he knew Eddie and Stan would get along. They’d probably team up to tease him and talk him out of ridiculousness. He really liked that thought.

“Yeah,” Eddie said, stepping aside to let Richie in. He skipped through, trying not to show the relief of not being turned away. “Two whole days. Practically a century.”

“It feels like it!” Richie plopped onto Stan’s couch, sprawled out in a way that let him feign confidence. He usually felt that way in Stan’s place: it was familiar enough that he knew he could be himself, no need to impress and every need to delight Stan and Bev for the sake of delighting them. But under Eddie’s gaze, Richie needed to impress. Moreso, he needed to convince.

“So,” he began, which felt too casual.

It also apparently sounded too suspicious, because Eddie held up a hand and frowned. "Are you about to suggest something that could get either of us arrested?"

"I haven't gotten you arrested once, Eds," Richie said, sitting up straight. "Which is, like, kind of a shame actually. I imagine LA jail is different from Boston jail."

"Oh my God, why are you here?" Eddie asked, sighing, and the image of him with his hands on his hips was so cute Richie forgot where he was for a split second. The world narrowed to just Eddie rolling his eyes at him, the beginnings of a fond smile tugging at his mouth.

"Party," Richie blurted out, needing to say something; all the words he knew seemed to be jumbled in his head, and he reached down into them like someone extracting a bingo number.

"We went to a party - do we have to go to another one?"

"God, you're such a cute little hermit," Richie said before he could think better of it, and both panicked at and revelled in the blush that rose to Eddie's face. God, he was so fucking distracting. "But this is an Official Christmas Party. Or, like, Neutral Holiday Party, because it's for work and stuff."

"Work?" Eddie repeated, looking worried. "This is a work Christmas party?"

"Neutral Holiday Party," Richie corrected him, and shrugged. "And, like, not really. It's mostly a networking event."

"Why would I go to your networking event?" Eddie asked, spinning around to stride into the kitchen. Richie leapt up to follow him, distressed by his movement; Eddie seemed to be avoiding his eyes now, and the downward cast of his gaze was leaving a heavy pit in his stomach.

"Because it'll be boring as fuck if I have to go by myself!" Richie moaned, draping himself over the kitchen counter, peering beseechingly at Eddie; he was sure the emotion still got across, despite being upside-down. "And I wanna go with you - it'll be fun to

make fun of the annoying people I know there, and they'll have free drinks and also those tiny sausages in puff pastry!"

Eddie glanced away from Richie's face, drifting over to the fridge. Richie straightened and watched him rifle through the contents to pull out a baby carrot and crunch on it absently; he looked like he just desperately wanted something to occupy himself with. Richie felt another flash of distress at just how avoidant Eddie had become.

"You don't have to or anything," he said, scratching at the phantom itch behind his ear; his skin felt odd and buzzing, like he was brimming with too much uncomfortable energy. "I just figured I'd ask - I thought maybe you'd have fun, so I asked, you know?"

Eddie had slowly pressed himself back against the fridge as Richie rambled, and he couldn't help but notice the way he seemed to be sliding sideways toward the living room, as though trying to escape without Richie noticing. But of course he noticed. He couldn't *stop* noticing Eddie - not since he had his first day in Los Angeles.

"I . . ." Eddie trailed off, fidgeting at his sides. He glanced up at Richie's face, and his gaze stayed glued there. "Fuck it, sure."

"Huh?" Richie frowned. "Fuck it?"

"Oh - like - I meant just sure." Eddie flushed, which was cute but worrying. "Sure. I'll go. When, uh, when is it?"

"Tonight," Richie said.

"Oh. Cool." Eddie was looking at the doorway out of the kitchen again; his voice had gone a tad distant, as though he was formulating a plan. "I'll - I just have to get some stuff done now. I'll meet you -"

"It's okay, I'll come meet you here," Richie said, waving a flippant hand. The idea of seeing Eddie in his apartment seemed a little too personal; he wanted to bring him there, not have him wandering over using google maps. Also, the mental image of Eddie standing like this, flushed and fidgety and dressed in a pair of penguin pyjama pants, felt like a punch to Richie's chest.

"Okay." Eddie started, then stopped, then started walking to the

living room, away from Richie. “See you later, then.”

“I’ll pick you up at seven, angel!” Richie called, because he was an idiot.

Eddie whipped his head around to look at him, brow furrowed. Then he yelled a high-pitched, “Yeah, okay, cool!” and darted up the stairs.

Richie left Stan’s house feeling significantly more hopeful than he had in two days.

Eddie had been pacing for so long that he had stopped twice to check that he hadn’t permanently worn his footprints into Stan’s plush carpet. He hadn’t, but at the same time, it felt like just one more stupid thing to toss onto the pile of stupid things Eddie had caused since getting off his plane.

It was six fifty eight. Richie was supposed to turn up outside Stan’s door in two minutes. Eddie was going to see him, in the sunset-washed light of late evening, probably dressed up a bit for his Networking Event/Holiday Party, and Eddie was supposed to just look at him like that and stay calm.

Ridiculous.

He couldn’t stop thinking about the phone call: the word *sweet* tumbling out of his mouth before he could second guess it for a moment, the slight tilt to Stan’s words as he reassured Eddie, sounding as knowing as the fucking Lord himself. He’d panicked about (maybe) revealing Bill’s big obvious crush on Stan, and Stan’s big obvious crush on Bill, and potentially tangling their lives together in a complicated, un-untieable knot. But, after the first twenty four hours of guilt, and then getting a photo of Bill in Eddie’s living room, lighting a makeshift menorah on the coffee table, Stan standing

behind him and clearly mid-sigh, he had felt significantly less terrible about it. (Georgie had sent him the picture, and Bill had immediately texted him to delete it and ask no questions until he got back to Boston. Eddie had graciously acquiesced.)

Now all Eddie had to stew in was the strange tension that had begun to settle between himself and Richie. And if Eddie Kaspbrak was good at anything, it was stewing in his own thoughts enough to start spiralling.

Was this a date? Had Richie basically asked him out? How long would they be at the party? When would they leave, and where would they go? Why had Eddie agreed to this? He had no idea what to expect, no idea how prepared he needed to be - what if he tried to do something stupid, like kiss Richie, and Richie was weirded out -

There was a thunderous knocking on the door, and Eddie just about jumped out of his skin.

When he opened it, it was to find a grinning Richie on the doorstep. His hair was tamed just a little, and he was sporting a previously-unseen mauve button-down and an actual, real blazer. His pocket square had tiny can-can dancing reindeer stitched into it. Eddie was actually going to die.

“Hey, angel,” Richie said. “You good to go?”

Eddie could only breathe out a, “I guess so.”

The party was in full swing when Eddie and Richie turned up on its doorstep. Richie held the door of the hotel open for Eddie with a dramatic flourish, and Eddie tried not to smile and also not to notice the flutter in his stomach when he walked through. All in all, they were playing the same back-and-forth nonsense that they had for the past week and a half.

It was a fancy hotel, and the party was set up in the fancy hotel’s

fancy convocation hall. The walls were draped in red garland and holly and evergreen boughs, and an enormous Christmas tree had been erected in the far end of the hall, glimmering with thousands of tiny lights and hundreds of ornaments. Eddie took in a long, calming breath when they stepped inside, and smelled chocolate and mulled wine in the air.

“Pretty nice networking event, huh?” Richie said, elbowing Eddie in the arm, eyebrows waggling. Eddie turned to him with a flat look.

“Yes. Please don’t do anything terrible.”

“No can do, Spaghetti!” Richie hustled them forward, further into the throngs of mingling people. Most of them seemed to be much older, though there were notable clusters of younger twenty and thirtysomethings - probably more performers and writers, Eddie thought, not executives. Richie might know some of them. Richie might introduce him to some of them.

Richie was about to start introducing him to some of them, Eddie realized, as he was steered to be face-to-face with a tall redheaded guy; he was easily Richie’s height, though less gangly. He smiled politely at Richie, and inclined his head with a sympathetic look to Eddie.

“Tozier, please tell me you aren’t terrorizing this newbie,” he said, looking back up at Richie. Eddie did the same, just in time to see the smile unfold across Richie’s face. He was radiant in the golden light of the hall’s chandeliers. *Fuck* .

“Not a newbie, Tom! My *date* !” Richie said the word “date” with a teasing, delighted tone, like it was a fantastic in-joke that he and Eddie had thought up. Eddie, meanwhile, was baffled and infuriated by it: was he Richie’s date, or wasn’t he? If he didn’t know, he couldn’t very well figure out how panicked he ought to be.

“Date?” Tom glanced back at Eddie, eyebrows raised. “That true?”

Eddie just shrugged. “I’ll let him think what he wants.”

Tom laughed - maybe a little too loud, Eddie wasn’t *that* funny - but

Eddie was preoccupied with trying to get a glimpse of Richie's face behind him without looking directly at him. He stared straight at a particularly festive trio of girls in glittering, mini-skirted elf costumes, and caught the tail end of a frown slipping off Richie's face. He felt a slight twinge of regret.

At the same time, he was growing more frustrated by the minute. Everything between them felt both familiar - the teasing, the bickering, the drinks Richie was now trying to sniff out for them - but running just beneath that surface was an incredible tension. Eddie wasn't sure what to say, how far he could take jokes. He had been teasing him just then, hadn't meant to hurt his feelings at all, but still managed to. Richie kept starting and then stopping himself from running his mouth and making inane comments and jokes every few minutes. It was as though they had fallen out of step with each other, and Eddie didn't know how to return to that easy, bantery rhythm. He was beginning to miss it.

Being pulled away from Tom with promises to catch up in a few, Eddie could only let Richie lead him through the crowd by the forearm, which Richie held gently and carefully. Eddie wanted him to slide his hand down to curl his fingers between Eddie's. He wanted Richie to stop being an idiot and do something about the discomfort around both their shoulders.

Instead, he let Richie hand him two bright red glasses of fizzy punch ("You barely taste all the alcohol in here, holy shit!") and drank both of them, repercussions be damned. Eddie wasn't going to get too drunk - just drunk enough to finally explode at Richie. Just comfortably, warmly tipsy enough to ask Richie why he didn't hold his hand like he had been.

Eddie missed the warmth of his hand. And he was thinking about it a lot now.

Richie wove the two of them through group after group of chatting coworkers, talking to executives and producers and a C-list celebrity or two; a lot of them asked about Bev with blatant curiosity that left a sour feeling in Eddie's stomach. Richie didn't touch his hand once, guiding him by the forearm or the shoulders. Once, he pressed his hand flat against Eddie's back, right between his shoulder blades.

Eddie let himself melt back into the touch, the tingling, tilting world of his tipsy brain letting out a long sigh of contentment at the sensation. Richie's hand was hot from the mulled wine he'd been holding, and it seemed to spread through Eddie's skin, warming him through his shirt.

But Richie had flinched away almost immediately, as if burned, and proceeded to guide Eddie by the elbow to the snack table. Eddie couldn't help the sigh that whistled through his nose at the loss of contact.

"What did I tell you, Eds?" Richie gestured grandly to the snack table, grinning. It looked like it was stretching his face strangely, almost plastered on. "Tiny sausages in puff pastry!"

"Yes," Eddie said, staring down at the horderves listlessly. "They're definitely here."

"These things are, like, the best part of Christmas," Richie was saying, piling a bunch on a tiny plate. Eddie was barely listening; he was too busy trying to follow the movement of Richie's face, trying to get a good look at his eyes. He thought they'd look much sadder than Richie's tone was letting on. He wanted to make sure, so that if he did something stupid it would be worth it.

"I'm gonna do karaoke." Eddie said it the second he and Richie's gazes locked; Richie's eyes were still soft and blue, and they were crinkled at the sides as though it pained him to keep smiling this broadly.

"What?" Richie's whole face slowly lit up, brighter than the Christmas tree behind him. Eddie could have stared at him for hours, he thought. Maybe that was the punch though. "Is this my Christmas present, Eddie Spaghetti?" "Sure," Eddie said, already striding over to the corner of the hall where a small crowd had started up a round of karaoke. He wanted to keep that light in Richie's face for as long as possible. He stumbled slightly in his determined march, but felt Richie's hand on his side, righting him.

Eddie sang karaoke. He had only done so in the safety of Bill's living room before, so it was certainly a new experience. Was he a good

singer? Not really. Did he know the whole melody to literally any Michael Buble song? Absolutely not. But did he watch as Richie shined like a fucking Christmas tree star the entire time he was stumbling around with two other people trying to perform? Yes, and it felt fantastic.

Richie and Eddie chatted and teased and cajoled in the corner for another hour, everything bright and startlingly beautiful. It was as though someone had flicked off Eddie's filter to paint everything in a terrible light, and he could now enjoy the lights and smells and general chaotic din of a massive Neutral Holiday Party. He let Richie talk him into dancing for two whole songs; they didn't touch that much, and Richie was mostly trying to do a complicated sort of sock hop, but Eddie accidentally laughed so hard he fell backwards onto the floor. Richie scooped him up, seemingly without thinking, and Eddie lingered in the feeling of Richie's arms around him.

The party was, at last, beginning to wind down. Tom, who had joined Eddie in his karaoke debut, had just bid them goodbye, and the two of them were snacking on finger foods as people trickled out of the hall. Eddie was the most pleasant level of drunk that he thought he'd ever been, everything bathed in a gorgeous golden light, the lights of the tree like blurred stars when he let his gaze relax enough to distort them.

"Wanna head out?" Richie asked beside him, and Eddie turned to him. Richie hadn't drunk nearly as much as he had, though he still wore the dopey smile Eddie associated with tipsy Richie.

"Yeah," Eddie sighed. "I just - would I get in trouble if I stick some of these in my jacket?" He held up a napkin full of horderves.

Without another word, Richie turned and shoved two fistfuls of coconut shrimp and tiny spring rolls into his jacket pockets, no napkin. He grinned at Eddie, who was still just clutching his napkin of snacks.

"Let's go, Spaghetti, before we're caught!"

Richie took Eddie's hand in one of his own, fully held his hand, and even though his fingers were still greasy from his heist, Eddie took a

second to appreciate the feeling. Then he yanked his hand out of Richie's, sprinting after him. "God, that's disgusting!"

They burst out onto the sidewalk outside the hotel, breathless and laughing. Eddie sat down heavily on the curb, shaking with it. "Holy shit," he wheezed. "Why the fuck did we - that stuff is loose in your pockets!"

"And now it's my snack!" Richie defended, popping a shrimp in his mouth. Eddie was aghast.

"Fucking gross," he said, trying to stand up. He tumbled sideways, just in time for Richie to catch him, arm wrapped securely around his waist. They were nearly chest to chest. Eddie looked up at him, and nearly stopped breathing.

"You really gotta get home," Richie breathed, right in his face. His breath smelled like wine and shrimp. Eddie's nose wrinkled in disgust, and Richie leaned back slightly, but not away.

"I'm not that drunk," Eddie mumbled. He definitely maybe was. Mostly, though, he thought he was just tired. He felt so sleepy and comfortable, full of rum punch and tiny sandwiches and Richie's heart beating loud enough for him to feel the rhythm through the barrier of their shirts.

"You are, Spaghetti," Richie said, frowning. Eddie stared up at Richie as he righted him, dropping his arms back to his sides. "C'mon, I'll take you home."

"So far," Eddie sighed. He didn't want to just go to Stan's house. Now that he had stepped out of his self-imposed isolation and into the sunlight of Richie, he didn't want to retreat. He wanted to stay out all night, all next morning, with him.

Richie sighed, hands on his hips. He looked ridiculous, so Eddie laughed; it felt bright in his chest. He watched Richie watch him for a long moment, a smile unfurling across his face. It looked fond; Eddie hoped it was.

"My place isn't too far from here," Richie said slowly. "If you wanted

to just head there. You can crash there if you want, I don't - it'd be cool."

"Crash?" Eddie echoed. "In your place?"

"If you want to -" Richie began, holding up his hands as though attempting to hold off an unknown force. "Only if you want to - I'd be fine with it."

"Oh." Eddie's voice came out soft. "Sure. Okay."

"Okay?" Richie repeated. He looked a little lost. "Okay. Okay, yeah, okay."

Richie called the uber, and Eddie let their thighs touch in the backseat. He didn't say anything, barely looked at Richie, just removed any space between their silhouettes. They formed a new one, that Eddie could see reflected in the front window of the car. It was a bit blurred, but he liked how sloping and soft it looked, like a gently rolling hill. Richie's hair stuck out like the wild tendrils of a grove of trees.

Richie's place was an apartment. Eddie trailed after him, through the lobby and then through his door. Was it his front door? Or was the door to the building his front door?

"You have two front doors," Eddie mumbled as he perched himself on the edge of Richie's couch. It was old and comfortable, though he wondered how many dust mites had made it their home over the years. He supposed there were worse places to sleep.

"Hmm?" Richie was looking over at him from the kitchen, where he was filling two glasses of water. He had slipped off his shoes and his jacket, leaving just his button down and dark jeans; Eddie could see the beaver socks he was wearing, poking out like a secret. Sitting in the middle of his apartment also felt like a secret, like he was getting to peek inside Richie's brain, into his privacy.

"Nevermind," Eddie said with a snort. "I'll tell you tomorrow."

"Alrighty then," Richie said with a laugh. "You feeling okay, Spaghetti?"

“Ugh, no,” Eddie moaned, flopping onto his stomach with a sigh. “If I was feeling okay, I probably wouldn’t have skipped town to run across the country.” He giggled, rubbing a

hand over his tired eyes.

“I guess not,” Richie laughed, handing him his water. Eddie gulped it down, and set it slowly on the table next to the couch. “Why’d you skip town anyway?”

“Oh, just . . . work. Sucked. Stressful.” Eddie was having a hard time putting sentences together, now that he was trying to remember Boston through the haze of the rum punch. It was such a blur: Robert Gray, smiling horribly down at him. Eddie, wine-drunk in his living room, reenacting a *She’s the Man* scene with Ben (Ben as Channing Tatum, Eddie as Amanda Bynes, naturally). The ad. Frantic typing at his desk, trying not to get caught. He didn’t want Myra to know. Myra.

Eddie let out something between a groan and a laugh. “Myra’s gonna be so upset with me. I totally went over her head.”

“Huh? Who?”

“Myra.” Eddie frowned; he hadn’t really thought about Myra in days, so wrapped up in his own drama. But now she was back, catapulting to the forefront of his brain. “My superior. She . . .” He took a shallow breath, his throat catching. “She doesn’t want me to leave. I had to keep it a secret from her.”

“What d’you mean?” Richie had come to crouch next to the couch, peering at Eddie head-on. “She doesn’t want you to leave Boston? Like go on vacation?”

“She doesn’t want me to leave her office,” Eddie corrected, letting out a short, bitter laugh. “She - she wants me to just fuck around - be her assistant forever and - she just -” He buried his face in the arm of the couch for a moment, letting out a frustrated groan. “I left because of her.”

“What?”

Eddie elaborated, because Richie looked dumbfounded, and because getting tipsy and complaining about Myra had felt so good in his living room with his friends. Sitting there with Richie, he wanted that same sense of release. "I said I wanted to get out of Boston because the universe was trying to kill me. It wasn't the universe -" Eddie paused, swallowing against the tightness in his throat. "- it was Myra. She's this - well, she's Myra fucking Wilson. She could - could crush me - my career - whenever, you know?" He coughed, hard, trying to rid his voice of its trembling. He wasn't sure when it had started to shake, or when his throat had gotten so tight. His words came out in a strange rasp. "And she would, and she was so mad at me for - for just, I guess, going over her head, trying to move out from under her - it got so messy, so fast."

"Eds, hey, you don't have to -" Richie began, reaching tentative hands out to brush over Eddie's shoulders.

But things were tumbling out of Eddie now, too quick for him to stop. "And now she's gonna - she'll be so mad, because I left and I asked Amy, not her, I didn't get permission -"

"*Eddie* ." Richie said his name with such pleading that Eddie blinked, quieted. He just looked at him, waiting; a breath in the rushing flood of his brain.

"Did you need to get permission from her? Is she in charge of scheduling, or hours, or whatever the fuck?"

Eddie frowned, shaking his head. "Well, no, but -"

"But she's not in charge then. Amy - it's Amy, right?"

"Yeah."

"Amy's in charge of that. You didn't need Myra's permission if she doesn't handle that. Right?"

"No, but she's - you don't know, you haven't met -"

"No, but I've met people like her," Richie said. His mouth was a flat line, and there was something knowing in his eyes. Eddie didn't like that Richie seemed to understand. He didn't want Richie to have to

understand this, or to be this serious. “I’ve known bosses who’ve made their employees feel like *this* -“ he gestured to Eddie’s crumpled face with a frown “- and made people call them their fucking *superior* . Do you wanna know something?”

“What?” Eddie tried discreetly to wipe his face with the back of his hand.

“People like that, no matter how talented or powerful or successful they are, suck. They’re absolute assholes, and they aren’t worth destroying yourself over.” Richie reached out and ran his thumb along Eddie’s cheekbone, smudging away the tear track there. Eddie let him. “And especially not you. You’re Eddie fucking Kaspbrak, and you shouldn’t feel so - so shitty and hurt *ever* .”

Eddie said nothing, but relaxed into Richie’s touch with a gentleness that was at odds with the raging thoughts racing around in his brain.

Richie sat down close to Eddie but not right next to him, not the way he really wanted. Eddie resolved this by scooting closer to Richie, seeking out the warmth of him.

Richie stiffened next to him, but soon relaxed into the position. Eddie leaned his head carefully against Richie’s shoulder, letting his eyes slip closed. His apartment smelled like tangerine air freshener and jiffy pop, and the only sound was the cars zooming along the road outside and the thump of their heartbeats. Richie was quiet, just murmuring just above Eddie’s ear, “You’re Eddie fucking Kaspbrak, okay? You don’t have to worry about anyone over here.”

Eddie didn’t mean to fall asleep, but then, he didn’t mean to do a lot of things.

Richie woke up with Eddie drooling on his shoulder, soft brown hair tickling his cheek. He spent a few minutes gathering up the details of

his surroundings before piecing them together; once he did, he nearly yelled.

He took care to slip out of the tangle of himself and Eddie, letting him drape over the couch to sleep. It was nearly seven am according to Richie's phone, and the tail end of a sunrise was peeking through Richie's window. He stopped, standing stock still in his living room, and looked back at Eddie, asleep on his couch. He was a glorious, lightly-snoring angel.

Richie smiled softly to himself, and opened a packet of pop tarts. It seemed about time for a Christmas Miracle.

Notes for the Chapter:

whoa !! a richie pov !! at long last !! what will his christmas miracle be ??!!!!

i hope the new chapter is alright - i'm not 100% in love with it, but i think the final reddie chapter i'm gonna be really satisfied with - i have a much clearer vision for how i want it to go

tysm to everyone who's read this fic, you guys are so so sweet - especially those of you that leave comments, you guys seriously make my day <3 <3

hmu on tumblr @thatsjustfangtastic if u wanna hang out or chat or anything <3 <3

Author's Note:

what's up everybody, i'm really launching myself into it (2017) fanfic huh?? also this is Gal's First Multi Chapter Fic !! hopefully it works out, also i've written like 12k of this in 24 hours, so let's go !!!! i love you and thank you for reading <3 <3